

# US occupation forces attack Iraqi journalists

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US occupation authorities shut down an Iraqi newspaper last month and have stepped up the detention of journalists for reporting on the ongoing resistance. These actions, along with many other repressive measures, indicate the true character of the “democracy” and “freedom” the American occupiers are bringing to the Iraqi people.

On July 21, Iraqi police accompanied by US troops broke down the front door to the Baghdad premises of *Al-Mustaqila* (the *Independent*) newspaper, ransacked its offices, confiscated equipment, and arrested the editor Abdul Sattar Shalan, whose whereabouts have not been reported since. The newspaper’s offense was the publication of an article carrying the headline “Death to All Spies and Those Who Cooperate with the US.”

The article appeared on July 13, the same day as the convening of the Iraqi Governing Council, whose members are Iraqi collaborators handpicked by the US.

According to a press release put out by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), as the occupation forces headed by Paul Bremer are known, the newspaper violated the CPA’s Order Number 14 on *Prohibited Media Activity* by inciting violence. Ironically, the home page of the CPA’s web site prominently features a photo of Saddam Hussein and the \$25 million reward offered for information leading to his capture or death, alongside photos of his two dead sons with Xs drawn across their heads.

Western media reports give no indication of having seen or verified the original *Al-Mustaqila* article, only repeating the CPA’s version of its headline. However, a journalist at the newspaper said the offending article was a news story on anti-US demonstrations in Fallujah, and the headline quoted a Muslim cleric involved in the organization of the protest.

The CPA has given its administrator, as Bremer is officially titled, unlimited authority under Order

Number 14 “to seize any prohibited materials and production equipment and seal off any operating premises” without warning and without compensation, as well as to arrest and prosecute those found in violation. Under the order, sentencing is to be carried out by the “relevant authorities,” which can only mean the CPA itself, as there is no functioning Iraqi judicial system. Appeals are allowed in writing only to the administrator himself.

The closure of *Al-Mustaqila* follows the forced shutdown of the radio station *Sawt Baghdad* (*Voice of Baghdad*) a month after it went on the air, because of its ties with Mohammed Mohsen al-Zubaidi, the self-proclaimed “mayor of Baghdad,” who was removed by the US forces in April. In June, occupation forces raided the distribution center of the Shi’ite newspaper *Sadda-al-Auma* in Najaf, impounding copies of an edition that supposedly encouraged resistance against Americans.

*Al-Adala* newspaper, one of several affiliated with the Shi’ite Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution, reported that on July 19 eighteen US soldiers backed by six armored vehicles raided the newspaper’s Baghdad offices, breaking down doors, tearing up furniture, destroying copiers and other equipment, seizing computers and even robbing several people, including one visitor who lost \$20,000.

The last few weeks have also seen the detention of numerous journalists whose reporting has run afoul of the occupation authorities. On July 1, two Iranian journalists filming a documentary in southern Iraq for the state-run Iranian network were arrested, along with their interpreter and their driver, on unspecified charges of “security violations.” Their belongings were removed a week later from the hotel where they had been staying, and on July 15, US authorities informed the Iranian consul that the reporters had been taken to the detention center at the Baghdad airport. No further

information on the detainees' alleged illegal activities has been released.

On July 26, four Turkish journalists were detained for 90 minutes, and their digital photos of soldiers were erased. On the same day, an *Al-Jazeera* satellite television network cameraman in the northern city of Mosul was arrested along with his driver while filming an attack on American forces. They were released the next day after going on hunger strike to protest their arrest, but their film was confiscated. Another crew from *Al-Jazeera* was detained briefly on July 22 while filming protests against the US-British presence.

On July 27, the Japanese journalist Kazutaka Sato was beaten by US soldiers and detained for an hour until other journalists came to look for him. He was grabbed while filming a US attack on a Baghdad residence thought to be sheltering Saddam Hussein. Although Hussein was nowhere to be found, five civilians were killed in the raid. The group Reporters Without Borders quoted Sato as saying, "It seems they had something to hide, perhaps the bodies of civilians."

In a statement released August 4, the Belgium-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which represents some 500,000 members in over 100 countries, denounced the US military crackdown on foreign journalists in Iraq. Referring to the recent arrests, IFJ general secretary Aidan White said, "All of these incidents are difficult to justify and reflect a new mood of intolerance. Journalists who are not under direct military protection are treated with suspicion and their rights are set aside. This is unacceptable. Journalists must be able to work freely—even when they are reporting a story that military people do not like."

The attacks on the press, both foreign and Iraqi, do not emanate simply from the occupation regime of Paul Bremer. They are part of a policy dictated from Washington. One goal of the arrests, harassment and shutdowns is to warn the new media outlets springing up in Iraq to "watch what they say" and engage in a form of self-censorship that makes direct government control unnecessary.

US deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, fresh from his tour of Iraq, used a July 27 appearance on the Fox News network to go on the offensive. Responding to a question from moderator Brit Hume, Wolfowitz singled out Qatar-based *Al-Jazeera* and Dubai-based *Al-Arabiya* for "false reporting and very biased

reporting that has the effect of inciting violence against our troops." Wolfowitz said the US was "discussing" the issue with Arab governments in the Middle East.

Wolfowitz's real objection is to coverage that reflects the widespread anger of the "free" Iraqi people over the foreign occupation of their country. Even the compliant American media, which endlessly repeats the official mantra that the resistance is limited to "Saddam loyalists" and "Ba'athists," came in for criticism by Wolfowitz for not focusing enough on the "success stories" in occupied Iraq.

The day after Wolfowitz's Fox News interview was aired, the two Arab networks issued angry responses. An *Al-Jazeera* statement said: "Mischaracterizations of our reporting made by Mr. Wolfowitz and others are a form of incitement to violence against *Al-Jazeera*." The statement pointed out that its staff had been subjected to "strafing by gunfire, death threats, confiscation of news material and multiple detentions and arrests, all carried out by US soldiers who have never actually watched *Al-Jazeera*, but only heard about it."

An *Al-Arabiya* spokesperson described Wolfowitz's words as "pure slander," and declared: "Wolfowitz must not expect *Al-Arabiya* to consider US troops as a liberating force. They are an occupying force..."



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