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Union Action and Protests in Iraq: A Problematic Relationship - Case Study on the National Union of Journalists

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Preface

The overthrow of the dictatorial regime in Iraq on 9 April 2003 raised many questions about the prospects for change, which did not occur in the country by internal will, but rather by foreign intervention. External powers left the country war-torn and without a clear internal social base to manage and organize the process of change. The collapse of institutional structures, the need for new institutions, and the strong desire to break free from the constraints of the past motivated protesters and civil movements to take over Iraqi streets. These protests began since the very first days of political change after 9 April 2003. For instance, hundreds of military personnel who were discharged held protests in Baghdad; thousands protested against the American occupation in Najaf; and dozens demonstrated in support of the Personal Status Law, rejecting its amendment by the Islamists who joined the government for the first time after the dictatorial era had come to an end.

Intellectuals, journalists, and activists played a leading role in mobilizing people and shaping public opinion, as well as in defending individual and collective freedoms since the first years following a regime change. These continuous activities, which lasted for an entire decade after 2003, led to the formation of a parallel union to the official Iraqi Journalists Syndicate, which was established in 1959.

This experience contributed to successes that have had an impact on Iraqi media, culture, and society overall. The trajectory of this union also offered profound lessons about collective volunteer work, which is essential to the establishment of any similar union in the early stages.

The importance of this paper lies in the fact that the National Union of Journalists is the first union to demonstrate continuity and lasting influence over an extended period, not to mention that it has had a significant impact on the political process, the lives of journalists, and the experience of collective work. The importance of delving into the experience of the national union also stems from the fact that it challenged the prevailing obedience to the State as the historically dominant



employer and sole economic rent provider. As such, the emergence of the national union was a breakthrough, as the overall context discouraged such experiences. It was not in the interest of citizens, most of whom were State employees, to adopt projects that challenged its policies.

This study aims to explore a unique experience of union action led by young independent journalists. It explores the difficulties of establishing unions in Iraq – not only because of the limited margin of freedom – but also because of the ongoing economic, legal and political problems that have lasted for several decades.

Historical and Legal Background of Union Action in Iraq

According to some historians, the professional organization for artisans in Iraq dates back to the second half of Abbasid rule in the 11th century A.D. At that time, internal economic and political developments led to the first regulations relating to artisans. Each trade or craft had a *sheikh* (or leader) who was supported by local authorities. These individuals received official recognition, and they were contacted and consulted on specific issues. The trade leaders forged traditions and customs among themselves, which were approved by the authorities and taken into account by judges and arbitrators when considering disputes between workers.¹

During the Ottoman era, the system of "superintendents" (*naqabat al-sharaf*) governed social organizations in major cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Karbala, and Najaf. These superintendents, or *nuqaba*, played a social role towards the inhabitants of their cities and a political role in the face of the Ottoman sultans and their representatives, including governors and army commanders. The "category" system also remained the main social organization system for artisans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Iraq, bringing together artisans, workshop owners, and employers. Each category of work had rules related to financial matters, particularly the wages of workers, the level of production, and taxes levied on the products.²



Arab Reform Initiative

During the last decade of the Ottoman Empire, legislations were issued to regulate the practice of legal agents (lawyers), as well as a system regulating the practice of medicine and another scheme regulating the practice of pharmacy.³

After the establishment of the Iraqi state in the early 1920s, the government issued decisions to establish a number of unions. During the early days of the monarchy and based on previous Ottoman laws and the constitutional traditions of other countries, these associations included clubs, such as the Iraqi Bar Association in 1918; the Iraqi Medical Association in 1921; the Workers' Association in 1928; the Association for the Cooperation of Barbers in 1929; and the Business Owners Association in 1929.⁴

Promulgated in 1925, Article 12 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Iraq recognized the freedom of Iraqis to express their opinions, publish, assemble, and form associations and join them within the limits of the law. Article 26 of the 1970 Constitution also stated that freedom of association and unions is guaranteed, so long as they are formed by legitimate means and in the best interest of the nation. Article 22 of the Constitution of 2005 also guaranteed the right to form and join trade unions and professional associations.

The Iraqi legislator also issued labour legislations that regulate employment contracts and outline the rights and obligations of employers and workers or professionals. These legislations also guaranteed the right of workers to create unions, including the Workers Law No. 62 of 1936, Labor Law No. 151 of 1970, and the current Labor Code No. 71 of 1987.

In 1978, Decree No. 150 was issued, which completely transformed trade union action. This decree stated that workers and artisans would be listed as official employees of the Iraqi government, thereby weakening the role of unions at the political and institutional levels. The decree was issued under the Baath rule, which came to power following a coup d'état in 1968. It was in line with the State's socialist vision of the economy, and it also aimed to suppress opposition and dissolve parties, which were often active through trade unions and student unions.

Unions and syndicates remained under the law and the government's grip during

⁴ Union Action and Protests in Iraq: A Problematic Relationship - Case Study on the National Union of Journalists



Arab Reform Initiative

Saddam's rule, and they also became an official tool used by the Baath Party to force people to join its ranks, draft intelligence reports and monitor citizens.

The official Iraqi Journalists Syndicate also fell victim to this practice under the Baath regime. Comprising only journalists from official newspapers and institutions, it echoed the ideological orientation of the Baath and implemented the decrees imposed by the Revolutionary Command Council.

The official Iraqi Journalists Syndicate was established by law in 1959. The famous poet Mohammed Mahdi al-Jawahiri was its first president. The union currently has more than 16,000 members and is officially linked to the State's departments and is granted an annual budget from the government

The Economic Context of Union Action in Iraq

Iraq's economy is heavily dependent on oil revenues, with oil accounting for more than 95% of the annual budget and 75% of its GDP. Despite this, the entire oil sector accounts for only 1% of the country's total workforce, which means that the Iraqi economy is extremely under-diversified. Statistics reveal the risks that the Iraqi rentier economy poses. By the end of 2020, the number of people receiving a government salary (civil servants, military personnel, retirees, and people receiving social benefits) was 4,800,000, which is the equivalent of 55% of the total working population. This percentage poses serious risks when compared to other countries, such as Iran (5%), Egypt (7%) and Jordan (13%). The economic risk posed by the large proportion of Iraqis employed by the State lies in the weakening of the private sector, while the political risk lies in the lack of interest in building institutions that support workers' rights.

This rentier economy is the result of more than 21,000 laws, instructions, regulations, and orders issued from the days of the monarchy until 2003, all of which are in favour of a rentier socialist economy supported and directed by the State. This, however, is contrary to the laws and regulations necessary for the success of the private sector and the country's market economy system.⁵



Arab Reform Initiative

Due to all these factors, the government in Iraq receives easy oil revenues and has become the primary employer. This has caused significant weakness in the private sector, which has relied on the State for decades. Naturally, this has undermined trade unions in various professions and sectors.

Despite this, unions were able to challenge the government when given any margin of freedom. For example, between 2003 and 2005, unions successfully organized protests and demonstrations in Basra against the "privatization" of the oil sector.⁶ However, the role of these unions quickly diminished, and their work within the various State ministries was undermined due to the general challenges facing union life in Iraq, such as the lack of organization, financial resources, and administrative experience, as well as the conflict of interest, whereby unionists are employees and union members at the same time.

These union movements took place in light of sudden and rapid media access and the desire to show the great freedoms granted by the post-2003 regime. These freedoms have remained one of the most important achievements of the period following the change of the dictatorial regime in Iraq, and they manifested themselves in the issuance of hundreds of newspapers, magazines, television channels and the formation of thousands of civil society organizations.

Civil society and the Political Context after 2003

Civil liberties are among the most notable achievements in post-2003 Iraq. The rights and freedoms section of the current Iraqi Constitution includes about 20 articles upholding citizens' right to life, security, and Iraqi nationality. This includes the rights to work, health, social care, establish trade unions and join associations and unions. The Constitution guarantees the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and protest, the establishment of parties and respect for personal status, as well as the freedom to practice rites. However, the implementation of these constitutional articles on freedoms faced several challenges, such as the reluctance to adopt laws guaranteeing rights and freedoms, including the law on freedom of expression; the right of assembly; protest and demonstrations; the law on freedom of access to information, and even the annulment of previous laws

⁶ Union Action and Protests in Iraq: A Problematic Relationship - Case Study on the National Union of Journalists



relating to unions or the adoption of pluralism in the country.

The main components of civil society in Iraq (civil organizations, trade unions and the media) were established before 2003. Numerous trade unions, dozens of humanitarian and human rights organizations, and media organizations (newspapers, magazines, radio stations, websites) have existed in Iraq for a long time, some of which were established abroad and returned to Iraq after 2003. After the change of the political system, thousands of civil organizations were formed, and hundreds of media outlets reflected the will of the public and the new democratic image. Many organizations and media outlets undertook new experiences in advocacy and education on public participation in elections. They also promoted the new constitution and defended human rights, including the causes of women and minority groups. They also contributed to emergency relief and humanitarian action, providing real opportunities for communication and offering a public space that brings together various ethnicities and religions.

It should be noted that, as professional groups, unions traditionally follow specific laws in Iraqi legislation. After the political change in 2003, it was necessary to adopt new legislation to regulate civil society organizations, which have sometimes been considered as a parallel form of unions in terms of professional affiliation (the case of the National Union of Journalists for example). The advantage of the NGO law was that it covered all organizations – which was not the case of unions, as each of them had a separate law enacted throughout the legislative history of the Iraqi State.

In terms of funding and expenditure, unions and civil society organizations can be divided into five main groups. The first group includes charities that receive funds primarily from religious institutions or political parties, whereby these political actors benefit from the publicity provided by civil society organizations or their collaborators, especially during election periods.

The second group consists of protest and anti-government organizations. These organizations have staged numerous protests, mainly after the Arab Spring of 2010. Some of these protests did not have clear demands and slogans – such as the protests held on 25 February 2011. Some observers pointed out how disconnected these organizations were from the concerns of the Iraqi people, such



Arab Reform Initiative

as those that were organized in support of the coup d'état against Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi on June 30. However, some protests had rightful demands. These were highly organized, clear, and influential demands, such as the one that took place on 31 August 2013, which called for the abolition of the privileges and pensions of Members of Parliament. These protest organizations do not require significant funding as long as they are active on the streets or social media pages.

The third group consists of so-called "elitist" organizations, which focus on elite gatherings and participate in conferences, seminars, and meetings with the media, without necessarily reflecting how deeply rooted they are in Iraqi society or representing real segments of the Iraqi society. These organizations, which are accustomed to dealing with international organizations and Western embassies, appear to be the most significant recipients of U.S. assistance to trade unions and civil society organizations during the presence of foreign troops in Iraq. Their US financial assistance amounted to about \$850 million, according to Lucy Chang, senior democracy advisor at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

The fourth group mainly consists of unions that operate under separate laws passed before 2003 (such as the Journalists Syndicate, Doctors Union, Engineers Union, Health Professionals Union, Workers Union, etc.). They receive their funds in line with the law and as part of the official state budgets, as well as from subscription fees and the services they provide to members. Because unions rely on public funding and their relationship with State institutions, they have lost interest in public affairs and are guided by the will of political authorities. This has been evident in almost every post-2003 protest; as official unions took no part in them.

The last group includes civil society organizations, which seek to provide specific services. They are self-financed or funded by voluntary contributions and are often small in size and low in impact.⁷

According to official statistics, by the beginning of February 2015, there were 2,192 unions and NGOs in Iraq registered under the current NGO law, specialized⁸ in several types of professions and trades, development, relief, culture, human rights, media, and youth issues.⁹



As for the media, the number of registered Iraqi TV channels increased from 2 before 2003 to 108, including 28 local channels, 25 satellite channels, and 55 radio stations in 2005.¹⁰ This number grew to 121 local, satellite, and radio channels by the end of 2014,¹¹ without taking into account the dozens of Iraqi satellite channels that preferred to broadcast from outside of Iraq.¹² This significant growth of Iraqi media played an important role in creating the motivation and need to establish a union/association that defends the rights and freedoms of its workers.

The Paradoxes of Journalism in Iraq

As the Iraqi political system collapsed on 9 April 2003, political events and questions about the nature of the new regime quickly unfolded. This newfound freedom encouraged many elites and intellectuals to try and influence public opinion through the media. The first generation of Iraqi politicians came to power after 2003, relying on two essential factors to draw their legitimacy: the first one was their opposition to the dissolved Baath party, and the second was calling for the establishment of a democratic regime based on elections, as an alternative to the dictatorship. Owing to these two demands, and with the support of international backing, the new political system gained legitimacy (in the sense of being accepted by the Iraqi people). This first generation consisted mainly of the political opposition formed before 2003 by the Islamists and the two Kurdish parties, which have a long track record of struggle against the dictatorship. They both have also suffered immensely from sectarian and nationalistic discrimination and are constantly wary of regional and international alliances. As this generation was constantly familiar and affiliated with religious, sectarian, and national affiliations, they did not hesitate to take refuge in these identities and express them in their daily discourse as part of the political quota system that distinguished the new regime. Of course, this generation has fully adapted to the new political system, which has provided them with all the necessary funds, authority, status, and sense of security.

Alongside the first generation, a second generation of educated young people emerged, which shared the same concerns as the first and also suffered from crimes of the former dictatorial regime. However, this generation was organizationally and culturally distant from the first generation. This, coupled with



Arab Reform Initiative

the competition to reach political positions through the quota system, may have kept them out of power. But, it turned them into a main pillar of the new cultural consciousness in post-2003 Iraq. The second generation of active intellectuals was motivated to work primarily in the media and press since the latter and social media platforms provided them with a dual influence on public opinion and political powers.

The second generation sought to achieve system reform, through daily awareness activities and multiple protests it held from 25 February 2011 to the peak of these efforts in July 2015.

It was in this context, characterized by a sense of freedom from political affiliations with national and sectarian parties, coupled with the desire to express this freedom, that journalists felt the need to challenge authorities and their policing practices, which were seen as an extension of the former dictatorial regime.

These journalists identified themselves as advocates of the political reform project and as "free" journalists practising, at the same time, their profession and civil activism and defending freedoms.¹³

Journalists enjoyed a certain immunity, similar to politicians. After 2003, civic activities succeeded in raising awareness of the restriction of civil liberties, making attacks or restrictions against journalists problematic for the government.¹⁴

In addition, media outlets that were not affiliated with the parties in power supported the movement of activist journalists, who became the basis of the civil movement in Iraq, given the weakness of unions and the novelty of civil society organizations. These media activists organized a large campaign called "Baghdad will not be Kandahar." This movement had condemned the assault by the Mahdi Army militias against a number of female students in Basra in 2008, along with many other protests and demonstrations. Journalists have been the mainstay of Iraqi protests from 2003 to July 2015. It can be said that journalists and media outlets – which play a key role in shaping public opinion – consisted of the educated elite. They were themselves activists in civil society organizations, and simultaneously the voice of political opposition on the streets. This is an Iraqi paradox by excellence.



National Union of Journalists: Origins and Independence

Following protests by activist journalists and new civil society organizations on 25 February 2011, as well as the Arab Spring uprisings, political authorities sought to reach out to the press by presenting a draft Journalists Protection Law to the Iraqi Parliament. The first draft of the law drew strong reactions from the press, which felt that the law, if passed, would restrict freedoms and distinguish journalists from the general public – similarly to how politicians distinguished themselves with financial privileges and unreasonable powers.

Journalists argued that the very name of the law, which entitled them to "protection" and provided for their allocation of plots of land, free treatment, and other privileges, was merely a bribe from the government. They asked that the title be changed to "the rights of journalists" and that discriminatory clauses contained in the draft be abolished.¹⁵

The law also reinstated articles related to publication offences and related laws, such as the Cinema Law, the Iraqi Publications Law, and the dissolved Ministry of Information Law. The latter was suspended by Paul Bremer, the civilian governor of Iraq after 2003. This gave journalists the feeling that the Iraqi political system had reverted to tyranny.

The position of the (official) Iraqi Journalists Syndicate was to support the draft law and to insist that the government include in all its instructions that "only journalists affiliated with the Journalists Syndicate are recognized as such." The syndicate even stood against journalists who rejected the law and threatened them using various punitive measures.¹⁶

The (official) Iraqi Journalists Syndicate had always supported journalists seeking to expand the margin of freedom in the country up until the assassination of its president Shihab Al-Tamimi in 2006 by Al-Qaeda, before Mu'id Al-Lami took charge of the president's tasks. Ever since, the syndicate has furthered the interests of the authorities, rather than defending journalists.¹⁷

After months of debate and media pressure on the Iraqi Parliament, the latter



Arab Reform Initiative

passed the law on the rights of journalists after taking into account many comments from the press, including defining a journalist as someone “working in the field of journalism,” rather than as a member of the syndicate.

The success in amending major aspects of the law created a spirit of solidarity among leading journalists and prompted the creation of a new union to defend journalists after the official Syndicate had abandoned this task.

Since the beginning of 2010, the press has been witnessing an increased repression of civil liberties, including the difficulty of issuing legal permits to civil society organizations. The licensing process lasted for several months unless the organization in question had political ties or an Islamic name. Other forms of restrictions included banning journalists from filming or taking photographs except with a special permit, restrictions on the right to protest, and enabling the Media and Communications Commission to monitor newspapers and impose taxes, which are not included in the powers defined by the Constitution. Many journalists stated that "carrying a camera at the time was equivalent to carrying an RPG 7; it put journalists' lives at risk."¹⁸

With all these developments taking place, and as the Arab Spring revolutions were unfolding, journalists were motivated to form an association to protect themselves in particular, and other freedoms more generally.

The Egyptian revolution encouraged Iraqi intellectuals to take to the streets and to become social activists, rather than isolate themselves from society.¹⁹ Despite this, intellectuals and journalists did not oppose the political system and did not demand the overthrow of the regime, as was the case in other Arab countries, because they were often part of the regime and its institutions.

The first Iraqi demonstrations after the Arab Spring uprisings were the pro-equality protests held on Valentine's Day 2011. Many women were among protesters, the majority of whom were activist journalists. "This provoked the authorities because of the organized and civil nature of the protest."²⁰ The government was aware that intellectuals and journalists, who were part of the elite, were unable to organize large-scale popular protests for objective reasons. These reasons included: the elite's sectarian social division, the fear of returning to civil war, the weakening of



the government, and the fact that the government at the time provided relatively good services such as public jobs, salary increases, financial subsidies, etc., primarily due to the massive increase in international oil prices. However, the press community felt the need to reform the political system by continuing protests and media pressure, as well as regulating the sector institutionally and intellectually, without any involvement from the official Journalists Syndicate.

An Association or Union?

The period following the approval of the Law on the Rights of Journalists and continuous protests by the intellectual elite of Iraq represented a critical moment amid heated internal debates – which focused on two main aspects. The first aimed at establishing a new union that would defend journalists and remain actively involved in all aspects of the public sphere, while other intellectuals and journalists defended the official Syndicate as the historical institution of this field.

The second aspect aimed at calling for the establishment of an association (or a civil society organization) to defend the rights of journalists, in order to avoid confrontation with the legally recognized Syndicate. This was met with opposition by many journalists who called for the establishment of a new union, as they believed that the official syndicate could not be reformed internally. This group also had a hidden desire to confront the government and its institutions.

Those advocating for the establishment of a new union were relying on the "permanent Iraqi Constitution," which guarantees the formation of syndicates and unions without any restrictions like (one union per profession). However, those who were in favour of forming an association believed that this would bring them financial support from international donors who required the presence of an officially registered entity, and that this would not be possible if a union was to be formed.

Supporters of the official Syndicate quietly withdrew from the discussions, while the demands of those who advocated for the establishment of a new journalists' union gained traction at the expense of those who demanded the establishment of an association. Several media figures lost interest in the debate, while others began laying the groundwork for the establishment of the new union called the



Arab Reform Initiative

“National Union of Journalists - Iraq.”

The founders stated that the motive behind the establishment of the new union was that the Official Journalists Syndicate did not abide by professional standards when deciding whether to include or exclude journalists, making its decisions instead based on how close journalists were to the government. It used to single out who they believed were “problematic” journalists and deny them media coverage licenses. It took advantage of its power to issue press identity cards, granting them as gifts to those who founded fictitious institutions or became mouthpieces for the government. Moreover, the syndicate was known for selling press cards to taxi drivers to use them to cross security controls. Terrorists, who were arrested later, also had taken advantage of this lax system.²¹

According to the founders, the official Syndicate took advantage of its media privileges and was provided with a cover for clubs, bars, and gambling venues, as properties of the Journalists Syndicate are protected by law. Hence, the official Syndicate turned into a caretaker of government interests, rather than protecting those of journalists. For instance, it did not take any administrative, legal, or even media action to protect journalists from the actions of security forces.²²

The dialogues held between journalists culminated in holding the constituent congress of the National Union of Journalists in early 2013, which also represented a flashpoint in the conflict between the educated civil elite and the Islamists in power. For example, in an attempt to prevent journalists from arriving to the Sheraton Hotel, where the constituent congress was supposed to take place, the government cut off roads leading to the hotel.

Despite these obstacles, the first constituent congress was held in the presence of a number of supportive MPs. The congress resolved the question of the union’s legality based on a constitutional article that upholds the freedom to join and establish unions. The Iraqi Constitution does not indicate that a profession must have one single union, and the Iraqi Parliament had not yet approved new union laws. Thus, “the union had a strong constitutional justification but did not have legal cover. This was similar to the situation of political parties at that time – which took part in the political process based on constitutional provisions that allow citizens to join and establish parties, despite the lack of laws regulating political



Arab Reform Initiative

parties and associations,"²³ according to the agreement on the legal justification of the union during its first constituent congress.

During the constituent congress, members of the Union Council and the President of the Union Council were selected, the subscription fees to be paid by affiliated members were set, and internal regulations on classifying press-related professions (such as photography and directing) were adopted for the first time.

During its first session, the Union focused on pursuing the task of defending public and press freedoms by taking stances and issuing statements. One of the main achievements of the National Union of Journalists was proving that it is possible to have multiple unions for the same profession, despite the opposition of the official Syndicate and political authorities.

The second achievement was its successful attempt to organize a protest in early 2014 demanding the release of Nader Dandoun, a French journalist of Algerian origins. The Union's position was decisive in dismissing the serious charges against him after 23 days of arrest.

However, little by little, the role of the National Union of Journalists diminished in terms of calling for, or participating in protests. Its support for the freedoms of expression and thought was also limited to the statements that it made. Article 38 Coalition in the Iraqi Constitution guarantees the individual's freedom of expression and right to protest and stage sit-ins. The coalition included roughly 90% of non-governmental organizations and many activists, in addition to the National Union of Journalists. At one point, the coalition was the only entity to take a stance in support of freedoms. The National Union of Journalists even failed to take part in the July 2015 protests, despite the fact that its members were the main actors in the protests that had started on 25 February 2011. The National Union took a stance in line with that of Article 38 Coalition in support of the Basra protests in 2018, which left many people dead and wounded.

The National Union of Journalists preferred to express its position in regards to the widespread protests that swept many Iraqi cities in October 2019, leaving hundreds of people dead and thousands injured. Their stance was expressed through pro forma statements issued by an informal assembly of a number of



unions supporting the protests.

The Union continued its journey with great difficulty for three sessions (which lasted 3 years each), during which it faced many problems that eventually diminished its role in the cultural and professional arena and its impact on issues related to freedom.

Methodology of Action

It seems that the National Union of Journalists, which was formed after several protests by intellectuals and a long struggle with the authorities, faced various challenges. These are as follows:

- **Lack of internal consistency:** During its three sessions, the Union did not have a mentor or leader. In each session, the president was merely a moderator who relied on a network of acquaintances (or friendships), rather than on openness towards members.²⁴
- **Communist influence:** Although the vast majority of journalists are civilians and secular liberals, communist journalists – due to their organizational capacities – were able to take control of many organizations and groups whose internal system is democratic, including the National Union of Journalists. In fact, the number of Communists in the Union's first session was two, and it rose to four in the second session. In the third session, the president was a member of the Politburo and an official spokesman for the Communist Party. The communist presence and its influence over the Union's discourse discouraged many journalists, who saw that the Union had turned into a branch of the Communist Party, whose purpose was to collect funds and grants.²⁵ However, left-wing members of the National Union of Journalists defended the communists, claiming that the party had not ordered or encouraged its members to join the Union. They also claimed that they had received advice from the leadership of the Iraqi Communist Party not to establish a union, but to instead try and infiltrate the ranks of the official Journalists Syndicate through its internal tools and mechanisms.²⁶
- **Authority dilemma:** The members of the Union often acted as a political



party opposing the political process through protest and activism, steering away from the Union's main objective, which is to defend journalists in legal and administrative issues and to bring them public privileges.

- **Secular seclusion:** It was decided that the National Union of Journalists would be a union for everyone working in the field of journalism, regardless of their political orientation. During the first meetings of its very first session, the Union Council took the initiative to visit all radio, television, and press stations, in order to invite their employees to join the Union. However, given the political orientations of communist members, this process leaned closer to stations affiliated with the secular left, failing to extend a hand to independents or Islamic stations.²⁷
- **Poor model and lack of experience:** The work of unions and organizations in Iraq after 2003 revolved around competition for privileges (such as travel, financial rewards, status in the media sector, etc.). The founding members of the National Union of Journalists had no experience in administrative union work or volunteer work, which posed a real challenge to achieving goals and making progress.²⁸ A prime example of the lack of due diligence and poor management practices is the loss of the Union's records and archives – including data, documents, and documented positions, as stated by the president of the current session of the National Union of Journalists.²⁹
- **Lack of independent press:** The majority of journalists were not working in independent and stable media outlets. Over time, the few non-partisan television, radio, and newspaper stations disappeared, allowing media outlets affiliated with political parties and figures to become all the more powerful. These state-affiliated media outlets draw strength from their abundant financial resources and the stability of their employees, which made them reluctant to engage in unionist disputes with the official Syndicate.
- **Corruption and lack of transparency:** Many founding members mentioned that in several cases, they were unaware of the amount of donations or grants and gifts provided by international organizations or donors. Some even mentioned that devious and illegal methods were adopted to obtain grants from international organizations because the Union is not officially registered.³⁰ The mismanagement, lack of



transparency, and the absence of a supervisory committee appointed by the General Assembly of the Syndicate also fueled accusations of corruption. This led to the targeting of some members of the Union's council, as heated statements and posts about embezzlement or administrative corruption in the Union were published on social media.

- **A union or a civil society organization?** One of the paradoxes facing the National Union of Journalists is that its activities now entirely revolve around training programs and awareness, which makes it more akin to a civil society organization. The Union has abandoned the task of monitoring, advocating, and raising its voice in support of individual and public freedoms. As mentioned above, this was the result of journalists' lack of motivation to join the new Union on the one hand, and the inability of the new entity to carry out its duties without financial support on the other, which led it to engage in partnerships with international organizations. These organizations did not support the Union for its work, but rather funded specific activities that were more NGO-focused than unionist.
- **Funding issues:** Funding is perhaps the Union's main problem, as many of the Union's 1,227 members today have not committed to paying their annual subscription fees, and the Union has not been able to find stable and sustainable sources of funding. This has undermined the Union's ability to provide even basic requirements such as a headquarters, membership cards, employees, and others.³¹
- **Legal issues:** Despite the constitutional justification for its existence, the constituent congress of the National Union of Journalists faced numerous challenges because of the lack of a legal foundation for the Union's establishment. This led the Union to defend a draft law entitled "Law on Trade and Professional Unions" submitted in 2014 by some deputies and specialized committees to Parliament. The law supported the existence of multiple unions for the same profession, in line with the spirit of the Constitution. However, the law was set aside after preliminary deliberations, as it seems that many official unions – such as the Bar Association, Engineers Association, Medical Association, and many others were opposed to it – in an attempt to maintain their unilateral hold on union action in their fields, rather than have to deal with a variety of



unions.



Endnotes

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5. Interview with the United States Ambassador to the United States Agency for International Development
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7. We referred earlier to the classification of organizations in terms of size and funding in an article published on Al-Monitor website. For more information, see: Ali Taher, "**Civil Society Organizations in Iraq... Illusion or Reality?**", Al-Monitor website: <http://www.al-monitor.com>.
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11. Media and Communications Commission, **Radios, Satellite and Local TV Channels Licensed for 2014**, pp. 1-10.
12. Ministry of Planning and the House of Wisdom, **National Report on Human Development 2008**, (Baghdad, 2009), p. 99.
13. Interview with Hamed Al-Sayed, founding member of the National Union of Journalists and alternate member of the Union Council (first session).
14. Arresting, beating or threatening a journalist was enough for their colleagues to dedicate TV programs and newspaper columns or even to organize protests for them. The most prominent example were the mass protests organized by journalists to condemn the Imam of Buratha Mosque, Sheikh Jalal Al-Din Al-Saghir, who insulted journalist Ahmad Abdul Hussein, who had written about the distribution of donations to citizens to vote in favor of a certain electoral list before the 2010 elections.
15. Interview with Qais Al-Ajrash.
16. Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.
17. Interview with Mustafa Nasser, president of the Association for the Defense of Journalists and founding member of the National Union of Journalists.
18. Many of those we interviewed during this study mentioned this.
19. Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.
20. Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.
21. Interview with Amal Saqr, member of the Union Council (third session).



22. Interview with Hamed El-Sayed.
23. Interview with Qais Al-Ajrash, founding member of the National Union of Journalists and member of the Union Council (first session).
24. Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.
25. Interview with Amal Saqr.
26. Interview with Yasser Al-Salem, president of the National Union of Journalists (third session).
27. Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.
28. Interview with Qais Al-Ajrash.
29. Interview with Yasser Al-Salem.
30. Interview with Amal Saqr.
31. Interview with Yasser Al-Salem.



Arab Reform Initiative

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Ali Taher Alhammood is the managing director of Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies. His research focuses on Shiite political Islam, ethnicities, and minorities.

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The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

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- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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