
IRAQ GUNMEN KIDNAP CAMPAIGNING FEMALE JOURNALIST

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Gunmen have kidnapped an Iraqi female journalist who has campaigned against widespread corruption in the country.

Afrah Shawqi al-Qaisi was taken from her home in the Saidiya district of the capital, Baghdad, on Monday night by men claiming to be security personnel.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has ordered security forces to "exert the utmost effort" to save her. On Monday, Ms Qaisi wrote an article in which she expressed anger that armed groups could act with impunity.

The article, published by the Aklaam website, criticised an interior ministry officer who she said had assaulted the principal of a school in the southern city of Nasiriya for refusing to punish a pupil who had quarrelled with his daughter.

"There is nothing worse in a country than humiliating a teacher; nothing is worse than neglect by those who carry weapons," Ms Qaisi wrote. "If the state is anxious to preserve its prestige, it should hold accountable whoever uses weapons illicitly."

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Ms Qaisi, 43, works for the London-based pan-Arab newspaper Asharq al-Awsat and a number of other local news websites.

She is also an employee of the Iraqi culture ministry, is active in the field of human rights, and has participated in recent protests against government corruption.

Security personnel searched vehicles for Ms Qaisi in the Saidiya district on Tuesday

The head of the Baghdad-based Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, Ziyad al-Ajeeli, said eight armed men had arrived at Ms Qaisi's house at about 22:00 (19:00 GMT) on Monday, claiming to be members of the security forces.

Before taking Ms Qaisi to an unknown location, the gunmen tied up her 16-year-old son, assaulted her brother-in-law, and stole her car, gold, money, mobile phones and computers, Mr Ajeeli added.

A security source told the BBC that the gunmen had been dressed in civilian clothes and had driven unmarked pick-up trucks with no licence plates.

The governor of Baghdad, Ali Tamimi, denounced what he described as a "barbaric" act that sought to "persecute and muzzle journalists".

Iraq is considered one of the most dangerous countries to be a journalist. Seven were killed in the country in 2016, according to Reporters Without Borders.