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# Killing Taints Iraqi Kurdistan's Image

By SAM DAGHER

SULAIMANIYA, Iraq — Kurdish writers and human rights advocates [are protesting](#) the torture and slaying of a young journalist, challenging what they say are oppressive restrictions to free speech in a part of [Iraq](#) that presents itself as safe and democratic.

The response has been chilling. During a protest here last week against the killing, a text message popped up on the cellphone of the editor of an influential magazine. “We will kill you like a dog,” the editor said it read.

Earlier this month, the journalist, Zardasht Osman, 23, was abducted in the tightly controlled capital, Erbil, [then found dead](#) with two bullets in his head on a road near Mosul, 50 miles to the west. Friends say they believe his scathing articles had angered the two autocratic parties that have long run the semiautonomous Kurdish region in the north, especially one in which he wondered whether he could rise from his poor circumstances by marrying the daughter of the Kurdish president, [Massoud Barzani](#).

Now his death is underscoring the limits of free expression and igniting angry debate about what issues could cost journalists their lives. Many question whether true democracy can take hold in this corner of Iraq that has been spared much of the violence and instability that has plagued the rest of the country over the past seven years, allowing it to be considered a haven for business and investments.

“It is a struggle between two fronts,” said [Asos Hardi](#), editor in chief of Awene, an independent Kurdish newspaper. “One front believes in democracy and open society, and the other wants to keep the family, party and totalitarian mentality.”

Mr. Hardi and his colleagues as well as some of the most prominent Kurdish writers and intellectuals inside the region and abroad are determined to keep the spotlight on Mr. Osman's case. They have begun a campaign — protests and articles as well as television and radio debates — called “We Will Not Be Silenced.”

The campaign takes aim at the hardships endured by journalists in Kurdistan: they are regularly harassed, intimidated, arrested and physically assaulted by security forces loyal to the governing parties.

Officials, including Mr. Barzani, have filed lawsuits against journalists. Reporters critical of the two governing parties or affiliated with the opposition are often labeled as traitors and proxies of foreign governments. The governing parties have actively sought to undercut independent media by starting countless television stations and newspapers and luring journalists with generous salaries and perks.

But unlike in other parts of Iraq, journalists have rarely been killed — and there is much debate about exactly where the so-called red line that they cannot cross is.

Kamal Raouf, editor in chief of [Hawlati](#), one of the region's first independent newspapers, said Mr. Osman crossed one with his satirical and irreverent writings about the region's patronage system and Mr. Barzani and his family, particularly a female member of the family.

"I am supposed to have crossed the red line of patriotism, morality and journalistic ethics the moment I mentioned the president's daughter in one of my articles," Mr. Osman wrote in a Web post in January shortly after he wrote a piece called "I Am in Love With Barzani's Daughter."

Another Kurdish reporter crossed a similar line about two years ago. Soran Mama-Hama, an investigative reporter, [was assassinated in July 2008](#) outside his parents' home in a Kurdish-controlled section of the city of Kirkuk after writing about the suspected involvement of Kurdish officials in prostitution rings.

According to Denise Natali, an American scholar based here in Sulaimaniya, "red-line issues" include criticizing the families of the region's two top leaders, Mr. Barzani and [Jalal Talabani](#), who holds the ceremonial post of Iraq's president.

The region's journalism law guarantees freedom of expression but sanctions reporters who "insult religious beliefs and symbols," sow "hatred and discord," and write about the private lives of citizens among other topics.

A senior Kurdish official said that there were now hundreds of media outlets in the region, most of them Web sites, and that few adhered to the most basic standards of journalism in a deeply conservative and clan-based society where [honor killings remained common](#). "It is really an obscene situation," said the official speaking on condition of anonymity because he did not want to be perceived as justifying Mr. Osman's death. "You have National Enquirer multiplied

by a thousand.”

In an emotional article about Mr. Osman's killing, the Kurdish novelist Bakhtyar Ali warned that red lines imposed by those in power would continue to be redrawn to serve their interests.

“The killers of Zardasht are among us,” wrote Mr. Ali in the article on his Web site. “They will once again kill someone else somewhere else.”

In a particularly pointed challenge, Hawlati published a column in its op-ed section last week titled “I Am Also in Love With Barzani's Son.”

“Does the writer of this column deserve death, too, or is this one normal in our country since it will not tarnish honor and dignity?” asked Aryan Umed, the female author of the column.

*Namo Abdulla contributed reporting.*