

Report on

**The Situation of Personal Freedoms of Iraqi
Youths**

**Prepared by (Al-Masalla Organization for Human
Resources Development)**

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Exercising Personal Freedoms

1. Real life examples of youths exercising personal freedom

There are hundreds of youths whose personal freedoms are violated around the clock, in every Iraqi governorate, at home, on the street, in schools and public places and elsewhere. Here we present some cases:

a. (H.M) the Rap Singer

(G Score) is his name in rap music, (H.M) is a rap artist with great ambitions to become a famous rap singer, not only for the sake of fame but to glorify the art he sees as oppressed in Iraq as are all the rap singers are oppressed too. These kind of artistic activities require state support, something which is lacking. He says that rap has a long history and requires care and devotion on the part of those who work in this art. This is the first objective of (H.M) to introduce real rap in Iraq and develop the situation of the art and the artistes. The unconventionality of this art resulted in striping (H.M) from all his freedoms. He received direct death threats from the religious group (Asaib Ahl Al-haq), they also hacked his Facebook account and blocked his online video clips. He was also dismissed from work for a period of time. The group argues that rap is an intruding Western art and the Iraqi youths should not be allowed to practice it freely as it is religiously forbidden (Haram). (H.M) thinks that rap is an Arabic art not Western; it begun in Akaz Market. Through this historical account he attempts to regain his freedom. He adds that religion is not against the kind of art that lives with the society and its issues. (H.M)'s liberty is not violated only by religious groups but also by social groups; groups that think that rap is an art with no value or direction. These objections come from family, friends and others who look at his work shallowly. Lowering morale is one of the means of deprivation of personal freedom; when they look at his achievements with negativity and pessimism.

(H.M) is not aware of his rights under the Iraqi Constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human rights because he thinks that all his rights are denied in his country. Thus he grew indifferent about his rights, though the Constitution guarantees personal rights and

liberties from childhood to elderly (H.M) has low level of awareness about the Constitution.

H.M has realized that silence and subordination will not stop violation of personal freedoms, but legal protections are necessary for persons like him to continue what they have started; claiming freedom through singing. He is not doing anything illegal; he rather practices liberties guaranteed by the Iraqi Constitution and the international treaties ratified by Iraq.

b. (S.A) the Squash Player

(S.A) is a special girl, aged 22 years. She is a professional squash player and fifth year student in medical school; she resides in Baghdad. She participated in many international sports competitions; with noticeable success without any institutional support. However, she is supported by family and friends and his coaches. (S.A) thinks that society is not able to control individual energy because it is individual who directs oneself towards any wanted direction. Thus dream can't be killed, when there is willpower behind such a dream. Despite some friends' discouragement, stating that her activity is not important, the encouragement she receives from her family has opened many door for her and motivated her to continue her journey. In relation to her constitutional rights she has little understanding of the contents of the Iraqi Constitution. She knows that every person has the right to free speech, and that the Constitution guarantees this right. She said that "one day I criticized one of my university lecturers on Facebook; which caused him to harass me. I decided to stop my criticism and public expression of my opinion as there are power structures and social limitations that restrict us from expressing our opinions freely." The state, society and other authorities limit the freedoms of persons like (S.A). Thus she spends her university days in Bagdad and the holidays abroad to enjoy more freedoms.

Often (S.A) faces harassment and verbal abuse on the street; her reaction mostly is to keep silence or sometimes she resorts to family and friends for protection. She grew resilient to continue her journey and achieve her goal. She thinks that individuals violating her rights do not affect her negatively; adding that individuals have rights within the state from the age of 18, when they grow mature and capable of rational decision making and understanding their rights. (S.A) thinks that the only solution to the problem of violations

is the enforcement of the laws, raising awareness and educating the future generations on personal freedoms and how to exercise them. However, under the current circumstances in Iraq that faces terrorism everyone has surrendered to the coming death.

c. (M.M.SH) the Writer

(M.M.SH) has obtained Bachelor's degree in Media studies. He is a well-known writer within the intellectual community. He has many important published works in paper and online press. His young age did not stop his mental productivity. However, this did not stop the society and family's negative views; because what he offers is simply contrary to their personal opinions and traditions of their ancestors. When (M.M.SH) defends his opinions he faces resistance and oppression just because his opinions are different from the others'. (M.M.SH) is very well read on the Iraqi Constitution. Quoting a friend, he said that "the Constitution reflects our explosive reality" thus freedoms are limited realistically and constitutionally. This is due to (M.M.SH)'s experience when he argues his opinions with others. In this country expression of opinions does not mean differing of views but rather conflict and even erasing the other party. (M.M.SH) said once he argued with someone who got really angry and told him "you are dangerous and should not be left alive because people like you destroy the country."

On the other hand (M.M.SH) experiences various violations by the government authorities and the society; not because he launches a war against an individual or certain political institution, but because he has a long hair, different from ordinary person's hair or a policeman's hair. He wrote in the introduction of his book (Criticizing Democracy) "we live in societies that reject differences and disrespect the differing party. We spend our days with people who hate plurality and disgust diversity. I and many others have got used to these. Often I face harassment for no reasons other than my long hair, or their dislike of my way of talking and dressing. Sometimes these harassments come from security persons who sleep (sorry who don't sleep) for the sake of the country. One day I was stopped by one of these people who asked my name and why I have grown my hair. I tried to answer him with hummer; I grabbed his sunglasses and put them on; asked him don't they look good on me with my long hair? He grabbed back his sunglasses angrily. I felt he was saying to himself this is an ugly person with long hair! He asked for my ID card. I handed it over with a smile. He said "I don't laugh with you" – stating that my smile was inappropriate – "do you know who I am? I'm lieutenant this and that head of this and that division. I can put you in the back of my humvee

and beat you until you bleed. No one can stop me or punish me for that. Who are you to joke with me?" I think he was trying to frighten me, but I don't bend down when it comes to arguing rights and liberties. Therefore I laughingly replied: what you are talking about could happen under the deposed former regime, but know Saddam has gone and we live in democracy. If you want to arrest me you must have an arrest warrant issued by the judiciary and you are not in a position to torture me. He replied to me with a smile: I don't need any of those. I can take you right now and torture you; who can stop me? My reply to him was: I will write about you later and highlight your misconduct; my friend will organize a demonstration if I go missing. The last expression was funny to him and made him laugh. Another night guard came, probably a lieutenant or a kind of boss like him, he told him to let me go. They returned my ID card and I allowed me to go.

These kinds of violations leave deep psychological scars in (M.M.SH) as he puts it: "I can overcome the matter, at least emotionally, however, subconsciously the matter get stored and turns into a psychological problem, comes out as fear, and anxiety. As the result I loss sense of security and feel that I live in a jungle, where oppression is collective." (M.M.SH) is lost, according to the views of many people including his family, encouragement comes only from close friends because the society and (M.M.SH) are alien to one another.

d. Long-haired (M.A)

(M.A) is a young man with Bachelor's degree in political sciences and has knowledge on the Iraqi Constitution and the laws related to personal freedoms. (M.A) thinks that these laws are not enforced and Iraqi citizens' rights are occasionally violated. These violations differ according to the living habitat of the citizens.

(M.A) thinks that the influence of religion and tribal system is great on limiting personal freedoms, particularly youths' freedom. There are other factors such as family and society that limit personal freedom, in addition to the unenforced laws. Thus we lack legal protection in this country. (M.A) says after his return from his trip in 2007, the taxi driver told him that his long hair is rejected at this period of time. The taxi driver informed him that the militias extrajudicially punish youths for their long hair and cut their hair. (M.A) didn't take the drive seriously and thought that he is exaggerating. He was surprised to be questioned by members of the security forces before he got home.

(M.A) remembers that the security forces questioned him for over an hour on reasons for growing his hair in this way. He spoke diplomatically, as he puts it, as he was afraid of arrest, he told them that he was abroad and promised to cut his hair. He later fulfilled his promise because of his fears.

(M.A) says: "I didn't expect the militias to challenge me because of my long hair or that the security forces will question me over it. These forces are there to protect us and our neighborhoods not to violate our personal rights."

e. (H.T)'s dress complex

(H.T) says "my personal freedom is denied by the environment and the society I live in and by the ruling traditions and customs in our society." She exclaims: "I see many clothes in the shops; I like some of them and hope I could put them on, but I couldn't, because of the society that forces certain patterns of clothing." Adding: "I am not convinced to wear Hijab, but I am forced to do so by my family and society, with the various excuses such as shame, Haram, fear of the security situation."

f. (D.K) compromises to complete education

The situation of Bagdad is not stable, forcing (D.K) to live at her sister's away from the girls' dormitory. Her family live in another governorate and she wants to continue her education and stay alive. (D.K) is pretty and clever, in order for things to move smoothly, she gave in to her family's demands in relation to wearing Hijab. She thinks that this is an infringement of her personal freedom to wear what she wants, but she also understands her family's fears regarding moving around Baghdad without Hijab.

(D.K) did not read the Iraqi Constitution's Articles related to liberties because she does not care – she thinks that the Constitution does not represent Iraqi citizens, it was written abroad, she feels that her locked prison is unbreakable and no source could give her sense of freedom.

(D.K) thinks that the society with its habits and customs denies her personal rights. What is more painful is lack of security above all other bitter situations; which makes live an unsolved crisis.

(D.K) thinks that these limitations and violations lessen human motivations to go forward, but her personal will, despite the psychological harms she continuously suffers, makes her resilient and want to complete her education and develop herself outside Iraq. There are two ways to combat violations of personal freedoms: one, to provide the basic needs such as security and safety and two, development of institutions to work on awareness raising.

g. (Q.W) likes photography

(Q.W) is a law graduate turned into new person by the art of photography. He has made a presence in the area of voluntary works and participation in art exhibitions. His distinctness made him subject to violations of personal freedoms, in the area of his hobby and work. Violations come from security forces with the excuse that photography may undermine security. His camera makes him a target, though he wants to photograph only the beautiful things in Bagdad, refusing to photograph death and distraction. He wants to glorify beautiful moments and achievements in the era of terror.

(Q.W) knows the Iraqi Constitution and the Articles related to liberty, but he thinks that the Constitution in only ink on paper and legal protection does not exists in Iraq. The reasons are two-folds: the government and its institutions on the one hand and the citizens on the other hand. Citizens are responsible for not enjoying and claiming their rights and liberties in their own country as they lack legal knowledge and government is responsible for not enforcing the laws and the Constitution.

(Q.W) thinks that the authorities can deny him any of his rights as the simplest activity requires burdensome procedures. For example peaceful demonstration, though Constitutional and international legal right, it is hard to exercise in Iraq.

(Q.W) suffers from violations of his rights, the security authorities forbid him from using his camera, a national security threat according to the police. On one occasion the police gave him the choice of handing over his camera or not passing through the check point. He chose the latter.

(Q.W) uses his rational reasoning when dealing with the security to protect himself, his equipments and his reputation. He thinks that the result of such violation is only psychological suffering. Taking photographs is a simple and legitimate right, but I can't exercise it freely, limiting my personal and professional development.

Violations against (Q.W) come from family too, when they try to impose their views and enforce the household laws. They think that photography is not a profession, it does not pay off and one can't make a living on it. They also have concerns over the safety of their son. Thus he thinks that personal freedoms start from the age of 18 to the end of life. However, there are no enforced laws to protect equally all and punish the violators. The society must demand the enforcement of such laws and must fight to protect personal freedoms. (Q.W) has got used to the reality, terror-ridden reality, going out while bombs explode became normal and part of ordinary life. However, there is still hope for better future, (Q.W)'s captures it daily with imaginary freedom.

h. (M.H) family restriction

(M.H) participated in a workshop organized by (Al-Masalla Organization for Human Resources Development) aided by (the Norwegian People's Aid) in Baghdad; to explain the concept of personal freedom and increase their awareness of laws and international treaties protecting personal liberties. (M.H) participated with his workshop colleagues to define personal freedoms and reasons for the denial and violations. (M.H) said "my freedom is denied by my family. I'm not allowed to go out for shopping, though they know my whereabouts, mostly close to home, they keep calling to know why I'm late!" (M.H) adds that "my family's repeated calls is due to their fear and concerns for me after the deteriorated security situation in Baghdad."

i. (W.A) family fears

(W.A) participated in a workshop organized by (Al-Masalla Organization for Human Resources Development) aided by (the Norwegian People's Aid) in Baghdad. She said that her family's fear over her safety is turning into infringement of her personal freedoms. She can't go anywhere alone; her mother accompanies her everywhere she goes; particularly when she attends workshops in Baghdad. (W.A) said that "my mother's presence with me makes me feel restricted all the time and that all my rights are denied." Although she graduated from civil engineering school, the security situation and her family's fears restrict her from living ordinary life as a mature adult.

j. (M.T) is punished with Hijab

(M.T) participated in a workshop organized by (Al-Masalla Organization for Human Resources Development) aided by (the Norwegian People's Aid) in Baghdad. She said that her personal freedoms are violated by her family. Her family wanted to force her to enter certain university, but she refused and went to the university she chose. Her family wanted to punish her disobedience with forcing her to wear Hijab. At the end the family had it their way and forced her to wear Hijab. She said that "personal freedoms of youths are violated because of various factors such as religion, tribalism and society. The most widespread violation against females is forcing them to wear Hijab or forcing them to go to certain universities or even forcing to marry someone they did not choose."

k. (A.M) and her inactivated freedom

(A.M) works in one of Baghdad's universities and participated in a workshop organized by (Al-Masalla Organization for Human Resources Development) aided by (the Norwegian People's Aid) in Baghdad. (A.M) thinks that Islam guarantees everyone's personal freedoms but within certain framework of rules. In relation to laws and institutions, the Iraqi Constitution includes one part on personal liberties, but most of the Articles are not activated.

(A.M) said that she faces violations of personal freedoms at work and harassment by work colleagues. She thinks that the reason behind this is the envy of some of her colleagues because her devotion landed her in the position she currently occupies. In addition hypocrisy and sectarianism of some causes problem to the mostly good-hearted people.

l. (A.W) and the iron chains

(A.W) participated in a workshop organized by (Al-Masalla Organization for Human Resources Development) aided by (the Norwegian People's Aid) in Baghdad. (A.W) thinks that personal freedoms entails that people could be different and carry views and undertake activities that suit their desires, while respecting freedom of others and the laws. She adds that "despite the beauty and excellence of Iraqi laws, personal freedoms in our society are chained with iron chains, placed by different holders of powers."