

END IMPUNITY

Identify, Expose and Hold Accountable

those responsible for past crimes

to prevent future crimes and protect journalists in the region



A report by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights

to mark the International Day to End Impunity on 2 November 2019

I. Introduction

“They didn’t die in vain, the world now knows what is happening here” is what one Iraqi from Karbala said on the night he saw protesters being killed. Journalists and media activists, despite their vulnerability and the extreme risks they face, should be credited for empowering whole movements that are demanding rights by giving them a voice on the world stage. Journalists in the region have always been targeted by those in power, but especially when there is a popular movement which gains strength from the publicity it receives.

On this International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, marked every year on 02 November, the Arab region has flared up with a new wave of uprisings. From Iraq to Algeria to Lebanon the world is watching as tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets to demand basic rights. From the jubilation of the crowds, the peaceful nature of the protests, the role tuktuks are playing in transporting the wounded in Iraq, or the injuring and killing of protesters, these are all things the world sees thanks to the people covering the events on the ground.

However, whether it is professional or citizen journalists, risking one’s safety and one’s life seems to come with the job. Unfortunately, we see this too clearly when we look at the cases of journalists killed in the region as featured in this report by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR). Throughout the years, and across borders it seems the one constant for journalists is the extreme risk they face to do their jobs. What must be realised is that what allows this horrific situation to continue, the cause, is in fact the culture of impunity. Hence, the solution and the way to protect journalists is to **identify, expose** and **hold accountable** those who commit crimes against them.

When Al-Sumaria, an Iraqi TV channel, announced that only one day apart two of their journalists were injured in the recent protests, they also reflected on how many journalists on their channel alone have been targeted in the past years. Having journalists attacked, injured, kidnapped and killed does not seem to be the shocking exception but the way “things are.” Far from serving as protection, it seems carrying a camera or even wearing a vest marked PRESS can prove to be fatal. As we pass the one-year anniversary of the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi we realise that even in a case this high profile and prominent, no one has been held accountable, despite massive worldwide protests, including from United Nations experts.

This means that impunity is in fact a bigger crime than the crime itself. Impunity is the vehicle that ensures the continuity of the crimes and the targeting of journalists. There must be a focus not only on who the victims of these crimes are, but also on who is committing them and how to hold them accountable. Only then will perpetrators think twice before attacking journalists. This is the reason that the UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 2013 designating 2 November as the International Day to End Impunity ever year.

According to UNESCO, more than 1000 journalists have been murdered over the past 12 years, including the 37 journalists mentioned in this report from Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Syria, who have been killed with impunity. The International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists is just one way to fight for justice.

II. Country Summaries

Iraq

One of the worst countries to be a journalist in the world, Iraq continues to witness the murder of journalists on an all too regular basis. Despite the end of the civil war in Iraq, journalists have been murdered with impunity, including during the protests that spread across the country in October 2019. Local rights groups have estimated that there are around 500 unsolved cases of journalists murdered since 2004. Below are a few recent cases from this year, dating back to 2013.



In a recent horrific crime, married journalists **Amanj Babany**, 40 years old, and **Lana Mohammady**, 29 years old, and their three-year-old baby boy Hano were gunned down in their car in Iraqi Kurdistan, on 16 October 2019. Babany presented *No Frontiers* on NRT TV Channel, while Mohammady had been a presenter for several years at Kurdsat TV Channel. GCHR received reports that passers-by found the bodies of the two journalists and their child, in their car. Eyewitnesses said gunmen fired live bullets at the car, which showed signs of the gunfire, killing the family. Yet, astoundingly, on 17 October 2019, the police chief of Sulaimaniya Governorate, Brigadier General Aso Taha, held a press conference in which he announced that Babany had fired a pistol found in the car, killing his wife first, followed by his son and then killed himself. He described the incident as a "suicide". His account contradicts eyewitness reports of gunmen, leading GCHR to believe there will be total impunity for the killers.



Al-Samiria journalist **Hisham Waseem** was hit with a tear gas cannister in the face while covering the recent protests in Iraq, a day later his colleague photographer **Ali Jassim** was also injured in the protests. The TV channel also mentioned their journalists **Reem Zaid** and **Marwan Khazal** who have been disappeared for years, and their photographers **Ali Raysan** and **Khalil Ismael** who were targeted in the past by Da'esh and injured. This exposes the fact that their journalists are paying a very heavy price for doing their job. On 22 October 2019, a government Investigative Committee recommended investigations into the deaths of 149 civilians and eight security personnel, but denied there were official orders to use deadly force against protesters. More protesters, including journalists, have been injured in protests since then and some of them have died after being hit with teargas cannisters. By the end of October, the death toll mounted to over 250, with over 10,000 injured.



On 02 February 2019, gunmen opened fire writer, journalist and filmmaker **Dr. Alaa Mashthob Abboud**, killing him instantly in front of his house in Karbala, located about 100 km southwest of the capital Baghdad. According to reports from the forensic medicine department, 13 bullets penetrated his body at close range. Before his death, he reportedly met with a group of writers and journalists before returning to his home in the old city center where he was killed. Dr. Abboud, born in 1968, published articles in Iraqi newspapers since 1987, in *Al-Sabah*, *Azzaman*, *Al-Mada* and *Al-Ittihad* newspapers. He wrote a number of novels including *The Chaos of the Nation* in 2014, which was selected as one of the five best books at the Abu Dhabi exhibition. He also directed a number of documentary films.



On the night of 09 January 2019, **Samer Ali Hussain**, a photojournalist working for Al Hurra Iraq TV channel, was killed in unknown circumstances. The Al-Quds police station in Baghdad reported to his family that his body was found with gunshot wounds on Army Canal, east of the capital. Police also reported that his car, personal documents, telephone, and all his belongings had disappeared.



Shifa Zikri Ibrahim, also known as **Shifa Gardi**, was one of the stars of the Kurdish media. In the beginning of the operations in Mosul against Da'esh, she produced a programme called *Fox Mosul*, and worked as a correspondent on the battlefields to report on the latest developments. She also was an active director of news production. On 25 February 2017, during her coverage of the battles in Mosul, Gardi lost her life and photographer **Younis Mustafa** was wounded by a landmine explosion.



On 13 August 2016, journalist **Widad Hussein Ali** left his home for work in the city of Duhok. He was later kidnapped in the Malta district of Duhok by an unknown armed group. At 12:30pm he was found dead, thrown on the road between Duhok city and Cemel village. Information suggested that he was tortured to death. Hussein Ali was 28 years old and started working as a reporter for RojNews just several months prior to his death. According to a statement published by RojNews, he had been summoned many times to appear for investigation before the Asayish which is the Kurdish security and the primary intelligence agency operating in the Kurdistan region.



Television cameraman **Arkan Sharif** was killed in the Iraqi city of Daquq, in the Governorate of Kirkuk, in Iraqi Kurdistan on 30 October 2017. Sharif was also a teacher. In the early hours of 30 October, eight armed men broke into the home of Sharif and killed him in a brutal knife attack in front of his wife and children. Kurdish TV blamed militants for his death,

but nobody has been arrested or prosecuted for the murder.



Véronique Robert was a Franco-Swiss journalist and war correspondent, who died in a Paris hospital on 24 June 2017, at age 54, after being wounded in an explosion in Mosul, Iraq, five days earlier, on 19 June 2017. She was assigned to Iraq for the France 2 TV channel's programme *Envoyé Spécial*. She was transferred to a hospital near the French capital

after being seriously wounded on 19 June. Two of her colleagues, **Stephan Villeneuve** and **Bakhtyar Haddad**, lost their lives during the same attack.



On 5 November 2013, two unidentified gunmen opened fire on **Kawa Kermyani** and killed him in front of his house in the district of Kelar in the province of Sulaymaniyah, 270 km north of the capital Baghdad. Kermyani, aged 32 years, worked as chief editor of the local Kurdish magazine *Royal* and correspondent for the weekly magazine *Awene* and had written several articles about corruption in the

Kurdistan region of Iraq. He faced many cases in the judiciary related to his anti-corruption writing, which were raised against him by officials and others. Nobody has been held accountable.

Syria

Syria's journalists and citizen journalists have been killed, imprisoned, kidnapped, and driven into exile. Many have suffered unknown fates at the hands of all parties to the conflict. In the past eight years of the conflict, over 130 journalists have been killed and at least another nine are currently missing, according to Syrian rights groups. Most of these murders have been committed with impunity. Below are just a few of the cases.



On 23 November 2018, human rights defender **Raed Fares** (center, pictured with his two sons) and media activist **Hamoud Jneed** were shot dead by unknown assailants wielding machine guns in Kafranbel, in a rebel-held area near Idlib, northwestern Syria. Fares, who founded the Kafranbel Media Centre, was well-known for his peaceful protests against the war, and for his popular *Radio Fresh* broadcasts. The murder was clearly premeditated, as the assassins waited in a van outside the office the two men shared and then followed them before murdering them in their car.

Fares had faced a previous assassination attempt on 29 January 2014, which he survived with two bullet wounds in the arm and shoulder. There has been total impunity in the case.



Seven years after the arrest and disappearance of **Ali Mahmoud Othman**, his family was finally informed of his death in early 2019. They have been told he died in government custody on 30 December 2013, 21 months after his arrest. On 28 March 2012, Othman was arrested by a military unit in Aleppo, and transferred to prison in Damascus, after which Addounia TV aired what is believed to be a forced confession in May 2012. Local sources in Baba Amr

reported that he had been tortured. Since then he has been disappeared in Syria's prison system, and despite many organisations and governments making enquiries about his well-being in the past years, there was no response from the Syrian authorities. There has been no accountability and it is imperative that the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria investigate deaths in custody of journalists, human rights defenders and all prisoners.



Journalists **Dilshan Ibash** and **Hawker Faisal Mohammed** of the Hawar News agency died on 12 and 13 October 2017 respectively after being injured by a suicide car bomb in Abu Fas in Syria. Ibash died instantly, while Mohammed sustained head injuries in the blast and died in hospital the following day. A large number of civilians, many of them internally

displaced people, died in the blast, and many more were injured, including reporter **Rizkar Deniz**.

The Hawar team covered the arrival of thousands of displaced people from areas controlled by the state in Deir Al-Zour to areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces when two car bombs exploded targeting a gathering of displaced people from Deir Al-Zour in the Abu Fas area south of Hasaka. The attack was carried out by two people affiliated with Da'esh. Ibash joined the Rojava-based Hawar News Agency around the end of 2015 after working for several years as a war correspondent for the radio station the Voice of Kobane. Mohammed had been working for the agency for two months at the time of his death.



Marie Colvin, a journalist for the *Sunday Times* and freelance French photojournalist **Remi Ochlik** were killed in Homs in a bombardment by Syrian forces on 22 February 2012. Colvin was an experienced and renowned war reporter who had covered numerous conflicts in various parts of the world for over 30 years and wore a distinctive black eye patch after losing an eye to a shrapnel wound in Sri Lanka in 2001. She was voted Foreign

Correspondent of the Year in the British Press Awards 2010. Ochlik was a 28-year-old photographer from the IP3 agency, which he co-founded in Paris. He quit his studies at age 20 to report on Haiti and has since covered many of the upheavals in the Arab world. He won a World Press Photo award in 2012.

On 31 January 2019, a United States judge ruled that the government of President Bashar Al-Assad was responsible for the deliberate and unlawful killing of Colvin in 2012 and ordered the Syrian government to pay more than USD \$300 million in damages to her family. While the decision brings some measure of justice in the case, it is unenforceable. Ochlik's family also launched a case in France.

Saudi Arabia

Many journalists in Saudi Arabia are in prison or exile, and some have been killed inside the country, or - even more shockingly - abroad. There is no independent media in a country which silences all opposition, including journalists and human rights defenders, and even those who work for government media are at risk. Women's rights defenders who write or blog or tweet about women's rights have been jailed as part of a crackdown that started in 2018.



Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi, 59 years old, was a prominent Saudi Arabian journalist, author, and former general manager and editor-in-chief of Al-Arab News Channel. He served as editor for the Saudi Arabian newspaper *Al-Watan*, turning it into a platform for Saudi Arabian progressives. He also wrote for the *Washington Post's* global opinion section. He

was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, after he entered the consulate on 02 October 2018 to seek paperwork for his forthcoming marriage. The Saudi authorities refused to comment on his whereabouts for over two weeks, and gave contradictory statements about what happened to him.

In 2017, Khashoggi had a falling out with the government over Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's controversial tactics as the Crown Prince worked to consolidate his power, including arresting powerful business executives and members of the royal family. The Saudi royal family also banned Khashoggi from writing after he was critical of US President Donald Trump, and it drove Khashoggi to leave Saudi Arabia for the US in the summer of 2017. In 2018, Khashoggi was critical of the arrests of numerous human rights defenders, including women's rights activists.

Following a six-month investigation, Dr. Agnès Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, published a report in June 2019 that found that "Mr. Khashoggi's killing constituted an extrajudicial killing for which the State of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is responsible."

The Special Rapporteur concluded "that there is credible evidence, warranting further investigation of high-level Saudi Officials' individual liability, including the Crown Prince's," but he has denied advance knowledge of the crime, instead ordering the arrest of 19 people who the Kingdom said were responsible, indicting 11 people and suggesting the death penalty for five people directly responsible for Khashoggi's murder. Those trials are ongoing.

Bahrain

Journalists and photographers in Bahrain are at extreme risk of being injured or arrested on the job, making it a risky profession in a country where there is no longer any independent media outlet, after Al-Wasat was shut down in 2017. Cases of impunity date back to 2011.



Ahmed Ismail Hassan was 22 years old when he was fatally shot by Bahraini security forces. Hassan was a videographer and journalist who often covered protests, marches and rallies across Bahrain. While documenting a peaceful protest, he was shot by security forces, and ultimately died from his wounds later that day. On 31 March 2012, there was a gathering in Salmabad, Bahrain, southwest of the capital, Manama, where demonstrators were protesting the Formula One Grand Prix. After riot police dispersed the protesters with rubber bullets and tear gas, armed men accompanied by security forces fired live ammunition at the demonstrators. Hassan was among those who were shot by the riot police, and a bullet severed a major artery in his upper thigh. Witnesses reported that Hassan was specifically targeted because he was carrying a video camera. Ahmed was the third Bahraini journalist killed since the beginning of protests in 2011, but his death was not investigated.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) found that two journalists had died of torture in custody in April 2011. **Karim Fakhrawi** of *Al-Wasat* died on 12 April 2011 and freelancer **Zakariya Rashid Hassan Al-Ashiri** died on 09 April 2011. Despite their cases being included in the BICI, mandated by the King himself, nobody has been brought to trial for their deaths.

Egypt

Egypt has a history of independent media which has been stifled in recent years and journalists often face jail or judicial harassment. During demonstrations in 2013, six journalists lost their lives, and over a thousand protesters were murdered in a single day, one of the most deadly days in the history of protests around the world.



Ahmed Abdel Gawad Mosab Al-Shami

Egyptian reporter **Ahmed Abdel Gawad** and photographer **Mosab Al-Shami** were murdered while covering demonstrations in Cairo, Egypt on 14 August 2013. It was a deadly day, with various groups putting the number of those killed from 1000 to over 2600.

That day, Egyptian security forces and army under the command of General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi raided two camps of protesters in Cairo - one at Al-Nahda Square and a larger one at Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square, which led to a massacre. **Ahmed Abdel Gawad**, who worked for the Egyptian daily *Al-Akhbar*, and **Mosab Al-Shami**, a photojournalist for the independent Rasd News Network (RNN), both died from gunshot injuries while covering protests in Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square.

They were among at least six Egyptian journalists deliberately killed during protests or violence by Egyptian security forces in 2013. **Habiba Abdelaziz** an Egyptian journalist for the Dubai-based weekly *Xpress* was also murdered on 14 August but her family claimed she was on holiday and not working that day. **Mick Dean**, a British cameraman with Sky News, was also killed by sniper fire on 14 August. There has been no accountability for any of their deaths.

Lebanon

It is generally safe for journalists in Lebanon, which has a thriving independent media, but two high-profile assassinations of journalists remain unpunished since 2005.



Gebran Tueni, 48-years-old, was the publisher and editor of the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nahar*, established by his grandfather, also named Gebran Tueni, in 1933. Gebran Tueni was a press freedom activist who was on the Board of the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), which named a press freedom award after him. He was assassinated by a car bomb on 12 December 2005 in Mkalles, an industrial suburb of Beirut. His murder was investigated as part of a UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon to investigate the murder of

former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, and while some accused have been brought to court, no perpetrators have been convicted as of yet.



Samir Kassir taught at the Université of Saint-Joseph's political science institute and joined *An-Nahar* newspaper as an op-ed writer and the director of the paper's publishing house. Kassir's articles and op-eds in *An-Nahar* in the late 1990s and early 2000s are still viewed as the boldest writings against the Syrian hegemony in Lebanon, the rule of former President

Emile Lahoud, and the political role of security apparatuses. He published many books including in 2004 two books in Arabic: *Democracy in Syria and Lebanon's Independence* and *Askar Ala Meen*. He was assassinated on 02 June 2005, in Beirut, when a bomb placed under his car was detonated in front of his home. His murder was investigated as part of a UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon to investigate the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, and while some accused have been brought to court, no perpetrators have been convicted as of yet.

Palestine

Palestinian journalists routinely face harassment and threats from the Israeli occupation forces as well as the Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



Palestinian community radio journalist **Ahmed Abu Hussein** died in Gaza on 25 April 2018. Hussain, 24, a journalist for the Gaza-based community radio, Sawt Al-Shaab, sustained bullet wounds in northern Gaza on 13 April that proved fatal. He wore a protective vest marked "Press" at the protest on 13 April, witnesses said. Photos of Abu Hussein lying wounded in his vest appeared on social media. He was the second journalist killed by Israeli gunfire since the weekly Friday protests, for a right of return of Palestinian refugees and their

descendants to their homes, which began on 30 March 2018. Nobody has been held accountable for his death, which was not investigated.

Yemen

The conflict in Yemen has left the country a very dangerous place for journalists. According to GCHR and its partners, at least 13 journalists and media workers remain in prison in Sana'a, while others have been killed on the job. According to the UN Mandated Group of Eminent Experts (GEE) on Yemen, "women human rights defenders, journalists and activists throughout Yemen continued to face gender-based persecution, and to be targeted by all sides as a consequence of their work. The Group of Experts documented 40 such cases, with many women still facing simultaneous threats from all sides."



Abdullah Al-Qadry, a photographer and camera operator for the privately-owned station Belqees TV, who also worked for AFP, was killed in Qaniyah, Yemen on 13 April 2018. He was killed in a missile attack while covering clashes in Bayda. Three other journalists were also wounded in the shelling of Qaniyah, near the border between Ma'rib and Al-Bayda provinces in the centre of the country. Al-Qadry died from a shrapnel

wound to the neck, according to a doctor at the hospital to which he was evacuated.



On 20 December 2016, prominent investigative journalist **Mohammed Abdo Al-Absi** died of a heart attack in hospital in the Yemeni capital Sana'a in mysterious circumstances. Al-Absi, 35, was an independent investigative journalist who published several important investigations and was known to fight corruption in Yemen. His family demanded to stop the burial and requested an autopsy because his death

seemed suspicious and he had been receiving threats because of an investigation he was working on about oil companies owned by Houthi leaders. An autopsy of the body was carried out 18 days after his death and samples were transferred to the Jordanian capital Amman to conduct a toxicological examination. The results, which were released on 5 February 2017, confirmed that he was killed by exposure to a toxic gas, thus adding further complexity to his death. Human rights organisations called for a transparent investigation and full disclosure of the circumstances of his death, but the case has not been resolved.



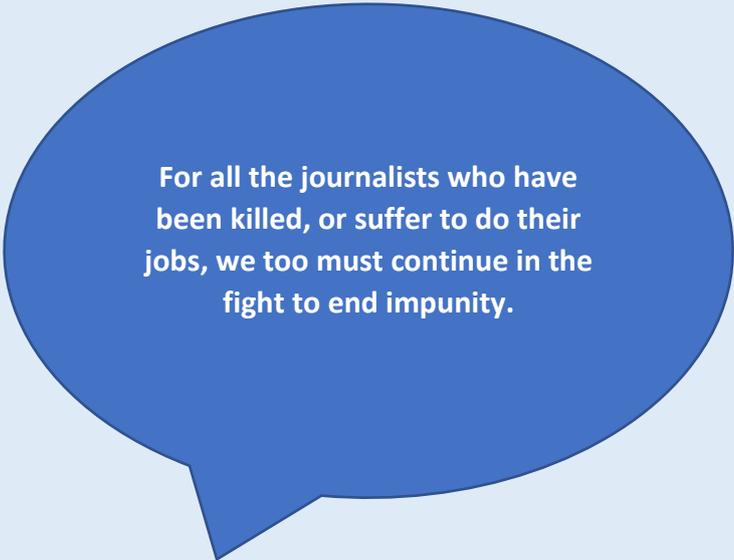
Journalist and activist **Abdulkarim Al-Khaiwani** was murdered on 18 March 2015, in Sanaa, Yemen. Freedom Foundation Yemen has reported that armed men riding on a motorbike gunned down Al-Khaiwani in the morning after he had just left his house, and the NGO's sources attributed his murder to "his daring and courageous writings." Al-Khaiwani had suffered numerous attacks since former President Saleh was forced to step down. He had been threatened with violence with knives and there was an incident in which gunmen surrounded his house threatened him, firing shots at the house, terrifying him and his family." His assailants remain unknown.

III. Conclusion

While this report focused on the deaths of journalists in the region, these crimes are the tip of the iceberg. Most of these journalists have lived horrifying lives up until the day they got killed for the work they do. Time and time again we read that before their death they had been threatened, attacked, imprisoned, tortured, injured, kidnapped and more.

In reality, behind every story of a killed journalist in the Arab world, there are thousands of stories of journalists who live on a daily basis under the threat to their lives and safety.

Yemeni journalist **AbdulKarim Al-Khaiwani** recounted to GCHR, during its mission to Yemen in April 2013, the numerous attacks, threats and imprisonment that he had faced. "**The only thing they haven't done to me is to kill me,**" he told GCHR, and then they did. We recognise, like Al-Khaiwani did, that the situation is grim. We recognise that in every picture in this report we take a quick glance into a tragedy. But Al-Khaiwani was determined to investigate and expose the truth even when he knew his life was in danger. And so we conclude this report with his words, of pain and hope. For he often said, "**we must and we will continue.**"



For all the journalists who have been killed, or suffer to do their jobs, we too must continue in the fight to end impunity.

IV. Recommendations

Following up on recommendations made during an event organised by GCHR with partners including UNESCO to mark the occasion of the [International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists](#) on 02 November 2018, and at GCHR's Gulf Platform for Human Rights Defenders in the MENA region in January 2019, GCHR calls for immediate action and:

- Calls on all concerned institutions to take note that most of the murders and other criminal violations committed against journalists and human rights defenders by government agencies or extremist militias have been carried out by unknown persons yet to be identified;
- Urges an immediate and serious investigation in order to find practical and effective mechanisms that decisively end impunity in crimes against journalists in all countries in our region;
- Urges governments and other relevant agencies work strenuously to hold accountable those who committed crimes against journalists and that perpetrators (and masterminds) of these violations will not remain unidentified [and escape impunity];
- Calls on all concerned parties provide proper protection to journalists in MENA countries and beyond so that they can carry out their work to the fullest extent;
- Calls on all countries in the MENA region to adopt the recommendations of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

About Us



The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) is an independent, non-profit NGO that provides support and protection to human rights defenders (HRDs) in order to promote human rights, including but not limited to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. GCHR is based in Lebanon and documents the environment for HRDs in the Gulf region and neighbouring countries, specifically Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. GCHR was founded in 2011. **See: www.gc4hr.org**

This report was written by GCHR's Journalism Protection Coordinator Zaynab Al-Khawaja. It was edited by GCHR's Fundraising & Development Manager Kristina Stockwood. GCHR thanks IFEX for its support for the report and activities to mark the International Day to End Impunity on 2 November 2019.