

Interview with Laith Ahmed

Coordinator of Radio Free Iraq's Baghdad bureau

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RFE/RL: How did you get started in journalism, and how did you start working for Radio Free Iraq?

Laith Ahmed: I started working with journalism after Saddam's regime fell, at [Al-Mutamar newspaper](#), [which was] for the [Iraqi National Congress party] of Ahmed Chalabi. After six or seven months there was a chance to work with RFI, so I went to their office in Baghdad and talked to the people there, and they tested me. I had to write some stories for them, make some reports, and the colleagues here [in Prague] listened to my reports and said, "Okay, you can start with us." The main reason I worked with RFI [is] because of their idea -- they started before Saddam's regime fell in Iraq, and I hated Saddam's regime so much, so maybe this is the first [reason]. Because there are many chances with other media organizations in Iraq, but what other organization should I work with? The balance of RFI's reports is just perfect -- nobody pushes you to say this or that.

So I started working for RFI in 2004, and my position now is Coordinator in the Baghdad office.

RFE/RL: How many journalists work in the Baghdad office?

Ahmed: We have maybe 11 journalists working in Baghdad.

RFE/RL: Are they old? Young? Do they come mainly from Baghdad area or are they from other parts of Iraq as well?

Ahmed: They are mainly Baghdadis, and [some] have bachelor or Ph.D degrees in media. There are maybe two or three journalists like this. The others have another bachelor's degree, like me -- I have a bachelor's degree in biology, actually. But because I like writing...I decided to go and work in journalism.

RFE/RL: What is the biggest challenge for your reporters in covering stories in Iraq?

Ahmed: The security situation [is] the main challenge -- not just for me but also for the other reporters and journalists in Iraq. Sometimes we say the security situation is better, but the fact is that we are still afraid because of the armed groups -- we call them in Iraq *al-khilaya al-na'ima*, the 'sleeper cells' ...They [are trying] every waking moment to do what they can [to attack us]. But mostly, the security situation [is] much better than if we talked about it perhaps one year [ago].

And then there is another challenge for us, because the politicians, and the heads of parties, it is difficult to deal with them. Most of these parties they have militias, and we are afraid of assassinations or something like that.

And another important thing is that the security [forces personnel] in Iraq, they don't have enough human rights education on how to deal with reporters. So many times they hit the reporters, they put them in jail...and it is difficult, it is a new challenge for us, because before they said 'we like the journalists, we want to keep them safe,' but...

RFE/RL: Do you think this behavior on the part of officials is a problem only facing RFI's journalists, or do all journalists in Iraq face this problem?

Ahmed: No, all Iraqi journalists face this problem. Maybe we have some special [challenges] because our radio is American-funded organization and it this makes it more difficult for us. Because the idea [in Iraq] is if you work with an American organization -- even if it is balanced and you [aren't biased against any

side] – you are still working with the Americans. This is a difficult thing for us because some people think of us as “spies” or “agents” or something like that.

RFE/RL: So Iraqis may be skeptical of Radio Free Iraq because of its association with the U.S. government. How are you able to overcome that challenge? How do you convince listeners that you’re objective despite your funding?

Ahmed: You know, many listeners may not know where the budget of RFI comes from. We discussed this with the supervisor here, to put the name on our ID card in Arabic. Even the name, Idha’at al-Iraq al-Hurr, Radio Free Iraq, is written in Arabic, so maybe they do not know [we are] from an American-funded organization. And then we [make sure] to keep ourselves safe, even when dealing sometimes with the armed groups. We don’t emphasize this.

RFE/RL: So would you say that it’s not a problem for most Iraqis?

Ahmed: Maybe for 60% of Iraqis, no. They like Radio Free Iraq...they like our subjects, our balance, you know about things even two or three months before [other news sources], such as fighting between Sunni and Shi’a...this is the great thing that RFI does – we make [it] balanced. This is not like most [media] organizations in Iraq, they take sides.

RFE/RL: Radio Free Iraq has done many stories about the training of Iraqi journalists in various seminars, courses, and conferences. In your time at RFI, how have you seen the quality of Iraqi journalism progress in general? Have they made improvements in the fairness and quality of their reporting?

Ahmed: You know, there are two sides, one positive and one negative. Because there are many -- maybe thirty or forty -- media organizations in Iraq. Not all of them are high quality. There are bad media and good media. But in my opinion, I have found that Iraqi journalists are much better than perhaps four years [ago].

RFE/RL: What is the biggest problem that still remains in developing Iraqi journalism?

Ahmed: Maybe money. Because the [domestic media] organizations pay a little bit of money to their journalists, and then the journalists don’t care about developing themselves [as long as they get paid]. And they stay at the same level. But there are some NGOs that develop journalists in Iraq, but you know, just having a few days for development [and training], it’s not enough to develop journalists and [teach] them how to make good reports.

RFE/RL: Have there been many examples of RFI’s journalists being in the middle of a violent event or dangerous situation?

Ahmed: We have many examples of our journalists giving reports like this. One of our colleagues was in a situation where the security police came to [defuse] a bomb, and she was there [and] made a report about it. Once I was near [the scene of] a car bomb when it exploded, and I made a report about it. Once I was near the al-Qaeda armed group, in the beginning when I first started working for RFI. There was a [firefight] between them and the American forces and Iraqi forces. I was there – not because I decided to be there, but I just happened to be there. Many of our colleagues, I think, have had the same situations, but having the chance to cover this, especially cover it live for the radio, doesn’t happen [as often].

RFE/RL: What would you say is the most influential or important story that RFI has broadcast in the past year?

Ahmed: Iraqis like politics, economics, and humanities stories. For me, I cover security, economics, and politics. Our colleagues cover good humanities stories too about how life is for the people. I don’t remember exactly which is the best because there have been many stories. Not last year, but maybe five

years ago, I had a really good exclusive story. I knew the cabinet for the [new] government before they [told] other media organizations. Because al-Maliki, I know him -- now he is prime minister, but before [that] he was a parliament member, and there is a good relationship between [us]. And the first elected government, when [\[Ibrahim al-\] Jaafari](#) was prime minister, they [were going to select] his cabinet and there was a meeting for the [Jaafari's Shi'a [National Reform Movement](#) party]. And in this meeting they [discussed the] final names for the [cabinet] in the evening, and they would [finalize] it in the morning. So in the morning, I called al-Maliki and I said [that] I want some information about the cabinet, and he said okay, if you want it come to this place, I will wait for you. And I went and I took all the information from him [about the cabinet members] before anyone else.

A lot of RFI people, they say here 'it's not as important that you bring exclusive things, but more that you are sure about your information.' Sometimes this makes me [frustrated] because I know I have exclusive things but I can't talk about it because I have to be sure, and I have to [get] some analysis and [sometimes] it takes even one or two days. For example, the first time Prime Minister Maliki went to visit Turkey, I knew he would sign a document -- he never told anybody about it -- to give the Turks the green light to [cross the border] 20-30 km into Iraq to fight the PKK. I talked to my editor about this information, I had a source in Kurdish politics, I even recorded his voice. And I remember what he said to me: "Be careful when you make this report, because this is a complex relationship with the [political situation]." So I asked Maliki when he returned, and he said "No, we never discussed this issue." But I know he did discuss this issue.

And this is I think an interesting thing for us -- if you want to be a clever journalist in Iraq you should have a good relationship with the politicians, with the economists, to know what [will] happen before it happens.

I think I've had a good chance to visit our radio station's headquarters [here in Prague] and maybe some of my other colleagues would like to come here to see what goes on, to get some training. I think they need that.

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