

WHO ARE THE FREELANCERS LEFT IN YEMEN?



06/10/16 Written by Austin Cooper



"Traitors and rebels who are more dangerous to the country than mercenary fighters." It's not the usual definition of journalists.

And Mohammed al-Jama'i - a freelancer from Sana'a - certainly doesn't consider himself in those terms. But when he heard Abd el-Malek al-Houthi's words broadcast on Almasirah TV late last year, he knew that he would soon find himself in the line of fire.

Sure enough, when the Houthis - currently in control of Yemen's capital - published a blacklist of journalists to be targeted, Mohammed found himself at the top of the list. "I fled as soon as I could - but even after I left Sana'a, I wasn't safe," he told me.

This is typical of the stories we are hearing every day from Yemen. Khaled al-Hammadi, President of the Yemen Freedom Foundation and an essential contact for RPT in the country, estimates that "at least 70 - 80% of journalists have left Sana'a. Those who remain are all in hiding, fearing for their lives." Precious few are able to work at all; there is no safe place for freelancers in Yemen any more.

It's easy to see why they've gone to ground, fearing capture and persecution. There is nowhere left to

work: over the last 18 months, independent outlets have been routinely shut down, their offices ransacked and their employees harassed - or worse. [In March, more than 500 journalists had already lost their jobs.](#)

More than 10 journalists have been held by Houthi forces in the north of Yemen since June 2015, without trial and in appalling conditions. For over a year this group - both freelancers and staff journalists - have been subjected to torture and solitary confinement in the highest security prison in Sana'a.

Their families find themselves in limbo, never knowing when husbands, fathers and brothers might be able to return home - this is the fate that awaits freelancers and their families who speak out against the Houthis. The wait is seemingly interminable: are they serving life sentences just for being journalists?

Khaled al-Hammadi believes that the group may be kept alive to be used as part of a prisoner swap with opposing forces. "There are three different types of political prisoner in Yemen," Khaled told me. "Politicians are in the first tier; they're the most valuable. Then come journalists, and with least currency of all, there are the activists. The peace talks convened by the U.N. have worked to release all three, but to no avail."

And yet, after 18 months of civil war, the resilient freelance community of Yemen who have withstood so much, are still doing what they can to keep reporting. "There's nothing we can do except be patient," says Mohammed. "We have to remain, to keep lines of communication open and working in Yemen - but we just don't have the resources to do so."

If reporting in Yemen is to continue, safety training is essential. UNESCO, local partners SEMC and RPT provided training for 12 freelancers in Ta'iz earlier this summer, but much more is needed. In a country where wearing a press jacket can get you shot, the right safety advice and preparation will save your life.

We are doing what we can, by providing emergency assistance to freelancers and their families in unimaginably hard times, and we'll keep passing on the stories we hear - but what's most important is that Yemeni freelancers are able to tell their own.

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Image credit: Courtesy of Reporters Sans Frontières, containing the images of imprisoned independent journalists Salah al-Qa'edi, Haitham al-Shehab, Wahid al-Sufi, Abdulkhalq Amran, Tawiq al-Mansouri, Hisham al-Yousefi, Mohamed al-Maqri, Ibrahim al-Majthoub, Jareth Hamid, Hisham Tarmour, Essam Bilgheith, Akram al-Walidi, Hussein Enab, and Abdullah al-Muneifi - all of whom remain detained without trial.