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### **Iraq: Environmental human rights defender Jassim Al-Asadi kidnapped**

On 1 February 2023, an unknown armed group kidnapped environmentalist and human rights defender **Jassim Al-Asadi** near Baghdad, Iraq. Armed men in plain clothes handcuffed and forced the human rights defender into one of their vehicles before he was taken to an unknown location.

[Jassim Al-Asadi](#) is a human rights defender, prominent environmentalist and academic. He is an expert on environmental issues, including water, and the protection of the marshes in Southern Iraq. Jassim Al-Asadi is a co-founder and the head of Nature Iraq, an Iraqi NGO which works on protecting, restoring, and preserving Iraq's natural environment and which has been outspoken on the condition of the country's marshlands. Jassim Al-Asadi is one of the few specialists and trusted sources in the field in Iraq.

On the morning of 1 February 2023, human rights defender Jassim Al-Asadi was kidnapped by an unknown armed group near Baghdad, Iraq. The human rights defender was travelling on the highway from Hillah to Baghdad when he was stopped by two vehicles. He was handcuffed and forced into one of the vehicles by armed men in plain clothes. Jassim Al-Asadi was driving with his cousin when the kidnapping happened. His cousin was left on the road around five kilometres away from the capital Baghdad.

The family of the human rights defender reported the incident to the Iraqi security forces, noting that they believe the reason behind the kidnapping is his human rights work. They also mentioned that they have not been contacted by the kidnappers. The Iraqi security forces announced that the police will continue to search for the human rights defender.

Jassim Al-Asadi was travelling to Baghdad to meet Iraqi officials on 1 February 2023, and was supposed to meet the Minister of Water Resources on 2 February 2023. Jassim Al-Asadi has been working on a major campaign to protect the marshlands of Southern Iraq, which are a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Recently, he has been assisting the new Minister of Water Resources with a plan to irrigate agricultural lands for the coming period. Jassim Al-Asadi has also contributed to the work against the construction of the Makhoul Dam, which could affect over 183 archaeological sites and displace thousands of families.

Harassment of human rights defenders and their families in Iraq has been intensifying in recent years, including killings, kidnappings, judicial harassment, threats and intimidation for carrying out their peaceful and legitimate human rights activities. Environmental human rights defenders have reportedly been facing threats and intimidation from armed groups, especially when working on topics in relation to the role of armed groups in environmental abuses and the oil sector.

Front Line Defenders expresses its grave concern regarding the kidnapping of Jassim Al-Asadi, as it is presumed to be linked to his peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights and the environment. Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern regarding the climate of impunity for perpetrators and the lack of protection of human rights defenders in Iraq.

### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Iraq to:**

1. Take all necessary measures to ensure the immediate and unconditional release of Jassim Al-Asadi, clarify his whereabouts, and guarantee his physical and psychological security and integrity, as well as that of his family;
2. Ensure that the ongoing investigation into the kidnapping of Jassim Al-Asadi be thorough and impartial, with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Iraq are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.