

2.9.2 Online expression

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Iraqi authorities reportedly conduct ‘mass surveillance’ of the online content.991 Persons accused of sharing inappropriate content were arrested under the article 403 of the Penal Code 992 which bans any material that ‘violates public integrity or decency’993 and imposes fines and prison sentences of up to two years.994 2024 saw an increase in prosecutions of creators for ‘inappropriate content’ online995 under the said article.996 Online harassment campaigns have targeted women and LGBTIQ individuals,997 including in the form of extortion. In this case, men threaten to publish an incriminating photo of a woman unless they do what they want;998 these photos can also be AI-manipulated.999 This is often seen not just as a violation against the individual, but rather as an attack on the family honour.1000 In August 2024, Iraqi authorities arrested TikTok personality Raghad Muhammad Ghali Jabr Al-Janabi, known online as Natalie, for ‘promoting indecent content’.1001 Another two social media influencers were arrested on the same charges in the same month.1002 Between February and August 2024, some 152 000 complaints were registered on the Ballegh platform.1003 According to the NGO Freedom House, those accused did not get due process and faced arbitrary penalties.1004 In March 2025, the government issued regulations for content creators requiring their registration and to pay fees, in a move that has been seen as a continuation of the crackdown on ‘indecent content’.1005 The use of the Ballegh platform reportedly continued into 2025, marking two years of operation.1006 The existence of the platform has reportedly led to a climate of self-censorship.1007 In October 2024, a female social media activist, Shayan Ali, died in unknown circumstances in a Baghdad prison after being sentenced to two years in prison by a Kirkuk court.1008 Ali was known for social media videos where she was criticising gender discrimination and argued with police officers. As of June 2025, Iraqi authorities refused to disclose the cause of her death.1009 Social media users may also be arrested for religious or atheist speech.1010 In August 2024, a Yazidi Peshmerga commander from Sinjar was charged with blasphemy and arrested by a court in Ninewa for ‘insulting Muhammad (PBUH), the Prophet of Islam, and inciting religious conflict’ in a video posted online.1011

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