



Post-ISIS Iraq **through the lens** of Ahmed Najm

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Frame, focus and shoot. It used to be the daily routine for photojournalist Ahmed Najm. Since four years, he has a new focus acting as a director and editor in chief of Metrography, the only independent press photo agency in Iraq and a partner of Free Press Unlimited.

Managing Metrography, which produces high-quality and newsworthy images, isn't the only thing that keeps Najm busy. The continuous search for his kidnapped and missing brother gives him an insight like no other into what is changing in his country – and what isn't. Najm also works as an interpreter and fixer for foreign journalists and press agencies. 'ISIS might appear defeated and elections have taken place, but peace has not yet arrived in Iraq,' he says.

Since 2016, Najm has taught military personnel, police and the dozens of security forces and militias affiliated with political parties and ethnic groups. He instructs them on the work of journalists and how to deal with media requests without immediately assuming reporters are natural enemies.

Armed and illiterate

'I teach this course a lot,' Najm says, 'but it's incredibly difficult. Since the elections in May, some 11,000 new army recruits, police officers and security personnel have joined the forces. These boys come from the countryside, are barely trained and receive a low salary – about \$700 a month. They immediately get armed to guard road blocks, where they extort travelers to supplement their income. Most of them are illiterate and can't even write a ticket. So the effect of some of the trainings is still small.'

Missing brother

Najm's brother Karaman, also a press photographer, was kidnapped while he was covering the first battle between ISIS fighters and Iraqi security forces in June 2014 in Kirkuk. Up to today, Ahmed is searching for him, some times inside mass graves and some times through the leaders of clans. During this research he is confronted with the feelings of revenge from the families of the ISIS-victims, many of whom are still missing. The families are angry and disappointed by the Iraqi government. Najm feels that while the war against terrorism has stopped, the work is not done: 'I

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think as much as we care about fighting terrorism, we also have to care about the aftermath of the war.'

White Flag

Najm also understands that the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS have caused deep resentment among different groups in Iraqi society: 'The strong emphasis on security by foreign powers such as France, Germany, the US and Iran have caused a situation where there is an abundance of weapons, meaning any conflict can turn explosive and acts of vengeance are easily carried out. And there's a new danger: the new terror organisation called 'White Flag'. ISIS was black, they're white, but they're essentially doing the same thing: sow terror.'

Hawija

'This group occupies a small area in the district of Hawija but its support base is growing rapidly. The inner circle of this group precedes ISIS, has very strong fighters and appeals to the youth. In a clash with the Iraqi army, 12 Russians fighting for the group were killed. I was in the city of Hawija and friends there insisted I leave before nightfall because I was in danger. In the daytime, the Iraqi army controls the area, but the soldiers leave when it gets dark. At night, White Flag is boss. I've had to be persistent with western media for them to take this group seriously.'

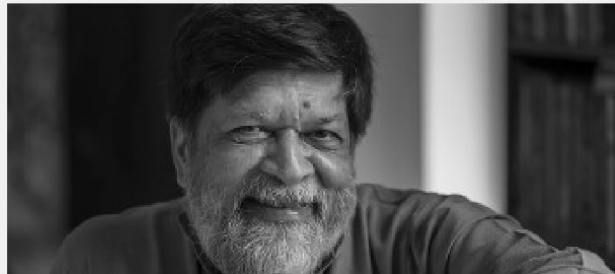
Terrorist factories

Iraq faces a long aftermath of the terror caused by ISIS. Najm visits prisons to conduct interviews, assist foreign journalists and possibly gather information on his missing brother. 'Those prisons are factories for new terrorists. Young children sit side by side with tough extremists and they learn a lot from them. To make matters worse, ISIS fighters who have been sentenced to death are sent to Najaf for execution. Most of these fighters are Sunnis, Najaf is predominantly Shiite. That of course fuels differences between the followers of these sects. Seen in this light, lasting peace is still a far cry from reality in Iraq.'

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