

Iraq bans al-Jazeera and nine other TV channels over 'sectarian bias'
By Associated Press in Baghdad, the Guardian
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The Iraqi authorities announced on Sunday that they had revoked the operating licences of the broadcaster al-Jazeera and nine other satellite TV channels, alleging that they are promoting a sectarian agenda, as the country grapples with a wave of violence.

The move, effective immediately, comes as Baghdad tries to quell rising unrest in the country after clashes at a protest camp last week.



The newsroom at the headquarters of al-Jazeera, in Qatar.
(Karim Jaafar/AFP/Getty Images)

More than 180 people have been killed in gun battles with security forces and other attacks since the unrest began on Tuesday. The violence follows more than four months of largely peaceful protests by Iraq's Sunni Muslim minority against the Shia-dominated government.

Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar, said it was astonished by the move. "We cover all sides of the stories in Iraq, and have done for many years. The fact that so many channels have been hit all at once though suggests this is an indiscriminate decision," it said in an emailed statement. "We urge the authorities to uphold freedom for the media to report the important stories taking place in Iraq."

The channel has aggressively covered the Arab spring uprisings across the region, and has broadcast extensively on the civil war in neighbouring Syria. Qatar itself is a harsh critic of the Syrian regime and a leading backer of the rebels, and is accused by many supporters of Iraq's government of backing protests in Iraq too.

Iraq and other governments across the Middle East have temporarily shut down al-Jazeera's offices in the past because they were disgruntled by its coverage.

The other nine channels whose licences were suspended by Iraq's communications and media commission are al-Sharqiya and al-Sharqiya News, which frequently criticise the government, and seven smaller local channels – Salahuddin, Fallujah, Taghyeer, Baghdad, Babiliya, Anwar 2 and al-Gharbiya.

In a statement posted on its website, the commission blamed the banned stations for the hardening of a sectarian backdrop that is fuelling the violence that followed the deadly clashes at the Hawija camp recently.

Iraq's media commission accused the stations of misleading and exaggerated reports, as well as of airing "clear calls for disorder and for launching retaliatory criminal attacks against security forces". It also blamed the stations for promoting "banned terrorist organisations who committed crimes against Iraqi people".

The decree states that if the 10 stations try to work on Iraqi territory, they will face legal action from security forces. Signals of their broadcasts, however, remained available to Iraqi viewers on Sunday.

The decision came as Iraq's embattled Shia prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, made a rare appearance at an official funeral for five soldiers killed by gunmen in Iraq's Sunni-dominated Anbar province on Saturday. Local police in the province said the soldiers were killed in a gun battle after their vehicle was stopped.

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