

Joint Statement: Serious Escalation in Sulaymaniyah and Suppression of Freedom of Expression and Assembly

June 26, 2025

The Protect Iraqi Human Rights Defenders Now (PIHN) campaign and the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI) express deep concern over the wave of arbitrary arrests targeting teachers, activists, and journalists in Sulaymaniyah, following calls for peaceful protests demanding the release of delayed salaries for public sector employees in the Kurdistan Region.

The campaign documented that on June 26, more than **11 individuals** — including protest organizers and civil society activists — were arrested in various locations across the city, particularly near the *Rozhawa Directorate of Education*, where the demonstration was planned to take place. Several journalists and media crews from different outlets were also detained while attempting to cover the events, in a blatant violation of press freedom as guaranteed under Law No. 35 of 2007 (the Press Law of the Kurdistan Region).

In addition to the verified cases, local sources report that approximately 50 people may have been arrested so far, as security forces continue raids and arrests amid a lack of transparency regarding the exact numbers and conditions of those detained. Eyewitnesses have reported a heavy security presence around protest sites, with preemptive arrests and legal irregularities.

Despite the authorities' claims that the protest might turn violent, the events clearly reflect a troubling pattern of repressing the right to peaceful assembly and criminalizing civic engagement — especially as opposition groups, unions, and independent voices joined the teachers in calling for legitimate demands.

We, in the *Protect Iraqi Human Rights Defenders Now* campaign and the *Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative*, affirm the following:

1. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of all detained activists, teachers, and journalists, and for accountability against those responsible for abuse or assault.
2. We reject the justification of these arrests based on "fears of violence," which undermines the legal and constitutional right to protest.
3. We urge international bodies, particularly the UN mission (UNAMI), the EU, and human rights offices, to urgently intervene and pressure the regional authorities to end these violations.
4. We call on all civil, political, media, and union actors in Iraq to express their solidarity with the detainees and reject this repressive approach, which contradicts the principles of good governance and human dignity.

Silencing dissent and cracking down on peaceful protests will not solve the salary crisis; instead, it will further erode public trust and deepen political and social unrest in the region.

Protect Iraqi Human Rights Defenders Now (PIHN)
Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI)