

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

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(Please use this reference in your reply)

2 April 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacity as Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/9 and 54/14.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning the **abduction and subsequent disappearance of the journalist Shelly Kittleson in Baghdad.**

Ms. Shelly Kittleson is a freelance journalist with extensive experience in reporting from conflict zones, including Syria and Afghanistan, for Syrian outlets including ANSA and Al-Monitor. She is a national of the United States of America.

According to the information received:

On 31 March 2026, Shelly Kittleson was abducted in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. CCTV cameras recorded her waiting by the roadside on Saadoun Street when a car stopped beside her, and two men forced her into the back seat.

Iraqi authorities pursued one of the vehicles involved, intercepted it after it crashed, and arrested one suspect.

Since then, Ms. Kittleson's fate and whereabouts have remained unknown.

Witnesses reported that the detained driver was a member of a paramilitary group, the 45th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a formation reportedly linked to Iran. The armed group Kata'ib Hezbollah, part of the PMF, is suspected to be responsible for the abduction and subsequent disappearance.

An hour before her abduction and subsequent disappearance, Ms. Kittleson was warned of serious threats against her from Iraqi militias. Reportedly, she had not received direct threats previously. On the same day, Ms. Kittleson's most recent article was published in an Italian newspaper, covering drone and missile strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In addition to Ms. Kittleson, nine other journalists, two foreign and seven Iraqi, are reportedly missing in Iraq to this date.

Without wishing to prejudge the accuracy of the above-mentioned allegations, we express our deepest concern about the alleged abduction and subsequent disappearance of Ms. Shelly Kittleson. We are alarmed that her fate and whereabouts

remain, and we are concerned that her abduction appears to be an attempt to silence her investigative and reporting work as a journalist. We are also concerned that her disappearance and those of the 9 other journalists whose fate and whereabouts remain unknown will have a serious chilling effect on journalists in the country. Should the allegations be confirmed, they would be in contravention to articles 6, 7, 9, 14, 16 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iraq became a party to on 25 January 1971, which provide for the rights to life, not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention, to be promptly informed of the reasons for the arrest and of any charges against him or her, to be brought promptly before a judge, to be recognized before the law, to freedom of expression as well as the for the *erga omnes* prohibition of enforced disappearances and of torture. These articles should be read individually and together with article 2.3 of the ICCPR, which provides for the right to an effective remedy for every person whose rights contained in the Covenant have been violated.

We recall the absolute prohibition of enforced disappearances and recall that this, as well as the right to life, are *jus cogens* peremptory rules under international law. We stress that, pursuant to art. 3 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (acceded to by Iraq on 23 November 2010), the State shall take appropriate measures to investigate disappearances committed by persons or groups of persons acting without the authorisation, support or acquiescence of the State and to bring those responsible to justice.

Moreover, we would like to refer to the [United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances](#) which establishes that “all acts of enforced disappearance shall be offences under criminal law punishable by appropriate penalties which shall take into account their extreme seriousness” (article 4), “no order or instruction of any public authority, civilian, military or other, may be invoked to justify an enforced disappearance” (article 6). Furthermore, “no circumstances whatsoever, whether a threat of war, a state of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked to justify enforced disappearances” (article 7), and that “the right to a prompt and effective judicial remedy must be guaranteed as a means of determining the whereabouts or state of health of persons deprived of their liberty and identifying the authority ordering or carrying out the deprivation of liberty is required to prevent enforced disappearances under all circumstances” (article 9).

Additionally, the Working Group also addressed the impact of enforced disappearances on the victims and the larger community. In its study on [enforced disappearances and economic, social and cultural rights](#), the Working Group noted that due to the collective character of certain economic, social and cultural rights, violations stemming from enforced disappearances, not only impact the rights of journalists, but also the rights of others engaged in related activities and of the larger community who relied on the disappeared person to represent and fight for their rights. Additionally, the Working Group highlighted the chilling effect of the enforced disappearance of journalists and human rights defenders and calls on States to “ensur[e] the existence of and respect for cultural diversity and the existence of space where multiple opinions, positions and interpretations of history can find their expression in the public sphere diminishes the level of vulnerability of those questioning in one way or another mainstream ideas and positions, and so prevents against targeting of human rights

defender”. Moreover, the Working Group’s Comment on women affected by enforced disappearances (A/HRC/WGEID/98/2) highlights that gender perspective is crucial in explaining, understanding and dealing with unique disadvantages and obstacles that women face in the exercise of their human rights.

We also underline that under international human rights law States have a duty to put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression, notably journalists, which includes the obligation to investigate in a timely manner and ensure accountability for the perpetrators.

In this regard, we urge the relevant authorities to adopt the necessary measures to prevent any irreparable damage to the life and personal integrity of Ms. Kittleson and undertake all necessary measures to search for her, pursuant to the Guidelines for the Search for Disappeared Persons, establish and disclose her fate and whereabouts. We call on the authorities to conduct a prompt, impartial, independent, and exhaustive investigation into the allegations of her abduction and subsequent disappearance, identify those responsible, prosecute and sanction them as appropriate.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on www.ohchr.org or can be provided upon request.

In view of the urgency of the matter, we would appreciate a response as soon as possible on the initial steps taken by your Excellency’s Government to safeguard the rights of the above-mentioned person in compliance with international instruments.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would also be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and any comment you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide detailed information on the fate and whereabouts of Ms. Shelly Kittleson. Please indicate, in detail, all measures taken to search for her, in accordance with the Guidelines for the Search for Disappeared Persons, and to investigate promptly, exhaustively, independently and impartially her alleged abduction and subsequent disappearance.
3. Please indicate the measures taken to ensure full accountability of any person responsible for her reported abduction and subsequent disappearance.
4. Please indicate the measures taken to investigate promptly and exhaustively the allegations of disappearance of nine other journalists in Iraq, identify their fate and whereabouts, and to prosecute those responsible for these acts.

5. Please indicate the measures in place to ensure the protection of journalists in Iraq from serious threats to their life and safety.

This communication, and any response received from your Excellency's Government, will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) at the 60 days mark. Should Your Excellency's Government respond within 60 days, both the communication and the response, may be published before the 60 days mark. The communications and responses will also be made available in the subsequent periodic report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to be taken to prevent any irreparable damage to the life and personal integrity of Ms. Kittleson, halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

Please be informed that a copy of this letter has been sent to the governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Irene Khan
Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion
and expression

Gabriella Citroni
Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances