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Mask Ban Upsets Iraqis Hired as U.S. Interpreters

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BAGHDAD -- The [U.S. military](#) has barred Iraqi interpreters working with American troops in Baghdad from wearing ski masks to disguise themselves, prompting some to resign and others to bare their faces even though they fear it could get them killed.

Many interpreters employed by the U.S. government and Western companies in Iraq do everything they can to avoid being recognized on the job because extremists have tortured and killed Iraqis accused of collaborating with the enemy.

"The terps are the number one wanted here," said A.J., a 36-year-old military interpreter, using the shorthand for his profession. "More than the Americans. More than anyone."

The interpreters have come to symbolize the bravery of Iraqis who have aided the American project in Iraq. About 300 U.S. military interpreters have been killed since 2003, said [Kirk W. Johnson](#), a former official in Iraq with the [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) who has fought to make it easier for interpreters and other Iraqis to come to the United States.

With security having improved in recent months, the U.S. military has begun to close neighborhood outposts and take down a few blast walls, slowly disassembling the capital's wartime architecture to restore a sense of normalcy.

Many Iraqis, however, fear the relative calm won't last long. To them, ordering interpreters to work without masks suggests that some top U.S. officials are taking an unrealistically rosy view of the security situation in Baghdad, which remains a dangerous city.

U.S. military officials said they began to enforce the mask ban in September because security in Baghdad has improved dramatically.

"We are a professional Army and professional units don't conceal their identity by wearing masks," Lt. Col. Steve Stover, a spokesman for the U.S. military, wrote in an e-mail. He expressed appreciation for the service and sacrifice of the interpreters but said those dissatisfied with the new policy "can seek alternative employment."

During years of active combat and widespread violence, interpreters have helped U.S. soldiers make sense of Iraq's streets, politics and history. These guides have been killed by snipers on foot patrols, blasted to shreds in roadside bombings and vilified by extremists as traitors.

Since U.S. troops deployed to small outposts last year, interpreters have played a critical role in helping American soldiers promote reconciliation, counter the influence of extremists and ensure public safety.

"The decline in violence in the past year and a half cannot be disputed," said Johnson, who founded the List Project, an advocacy group for Iraqis who have worked for the American government. "But to think somehow that the lethal stigma faced by our Iraqi allies has suddenly worn off is folly."

Despite the improved security, a growing number of Iraqis have contacted Johnson's group in recent months, many expressing concern about the mask ban. "We have hundreds of Iraqis writing to us in desperation and fear, most of whom fled because their affiliation became known," Johnson said.

Under pressure from Congress to do more for Iraqi interpreters working for the U.S. government, the [State Department](#) this year launched a streamlined immigrant visa program for them.

Some U.S. soldiers said enforcing the policy makes them feel terrible.

"It's a life-and-death issue for them," said Staff Sgt. Jeremy Ziegler, who works in Dora, a district in southern Baghdad. "I don't see anything wrong with them wearing a mask. Why risk the lives of those who work with us?"

An interpreter assigned to Ziegler's battalion was abducted at home, tortured and slain a few months before the mask ban was implemented, said Army Capt. Ryan Edwards, the company commander.

Although large extremist groups have been markedly weakened in recent months, smaller cells still target interpreters, he said.

"They want to target the big payoffs, and the terps are one of them," Edwards said.

A 24-year-old interpreter who uses the name Jack and is assigned to a U.S. military base in Rustamiyah, a neighborhood in eastern Baghdad, said he was devastated when his supervisor told him in September that he could no longer wear a mask.

During his first patrol without a mask, "some bad guys" recognized him, he said. The next time he went home on vacation, his terrified mother told him someone had shot dozens of rounds at the family's southern Baghdad house.

"My mom just about got killed," said Jack, who like others interviewed for this story asked to be identified only by his military-assigned nickname. A.J., who works at Forward Operating Base Falcon in Dora, said he was fired after a national police commander reported him for wearing a mask.

"They gave me one hour to leave the FOB," he said. Leaving a large military base after dark can be dangerous, he said. "It's like they said, 'Go get killed.' "

After A.J.'s company commander stepped in, he was able to keep his job but was assigned to a different company.

Since the mask ban was implemented, A.J. and several other interpreters have grown beards and purchased ski goggles. A.J., who has worked for the military on and off for five years, said he is proud of his work -- even though only his wife knows what he does.

Many interpreters lead double lives. Even among close friends at work, many don't disclose their identities or neighborhoods. The [Mahdi Army](#), the armed group led by anti-American Shiite cleric [Moqtada al-Sadr](#), collects and distributes photos of interpreters working with U.S. troops, A.J. and a colleague, Maximus, said.

"If anyone has a picture of your face, they pass it on to another area," said Maximus, 28, who has worked with the military on and off since 2003. "We can't work for the [U.S. Army](#) if we don't wear a

mask. If they recognize our face, they're going to kill our families."

Maximus has begun smearing mascara on his cheeks to disguise himself.

Several interpreters said they worry about what might happen to them when U.S. troops withdraw from Iraq.

"Now that [Obama](#) wins, they are going to leave sooner or later," said Maximus, who works with a psychological operations unit. "We've fought for them all this time. When it's all done, nobody appreciates it."

Stover, the U.S. military spokesman, said he didn't know how many interpreters have resigned or been reassigned as a result of the mask rule.

In any case, he said, the Baghdad command "is not having problems, as the contractor is not having any issues filling our translators/interpreters requirement."

Special correspondent Aziz Alwan contributed to this report.

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