

MIDDLE EAST

A Journalist Behind Bars: The Dangers of Reporting in Lebanon

Lebanese-Palestinian journalist Rami Aysha, who works for Time and several other foreign news agencies in Lebanon, has been detained by Lebanese authorities while reporting a story.

By ARYN BAKER | @arynebaker | September 15, 2012



Journalist and translator Rami Aysha.

One of the little known aspects of the work of foreign correspondents is how much we rely on the help of our local colleagues and translators. In Western journalistic slang they are often called “fixers”—as they are far more than that. They translate both language and culture and they are repositories of vital information—everything from an essential phone number to insider knowledge of how to navigate arcane government procedures. They are our eyes and ears in places we can’t reach, and in many cases serve as valuable sounding boards for developing story ideas. Oftentimes they provide the kernel to our full-blown scoops and exposes, gleaned from contacts and street gossip that we would never otherwise hear. But that ground-level work can be perilous.

Rami Aysha, a well-known Lebanese-Palestinian reporter who has done this valuable work for several major foreign news organizations in Lebanon, including Time, was picked up two weeks ago while reporting a story in Beirut’s Hizballah-controlled southern suburbs. Hizballah agents stopped Aysha, who was traveling in a car with two other men, at gunpoint. The three men were badly beaten, and Aysha’s video camera was destroyed. The three men were then turned over to Lebanon’s military police, who continued to beat them, according to accounts from Aysha’s lawyer.

According to the lawyer, Aysha’s case was heard by a military judge who refused to release him on bail, even though charges have yet to be brought. On September 12, Aysha was transferred to Quba Prison in the northern city of Tripoli, far from his wife and daughter, where he is only allowed limited contact with his family. “He is terrified,” says his brother, Ramzi Aysha. “He is surrounded by criminals, yet he was doing nothing but journalism.”

According to a report by Hizballah’s Al-Manar TV, Aysha was arrested along with an army lieutenant identified as Wissam Abd al-Khalik and a third person identified as the officer’s cousin. The report acknowledged that Aysha was a journalist investigating a potential story. On Thursday a military judge said that Aysha could not be released until the investigation was complete, according to Ramzi Aysha. A court date has not been set, and under Lebanese law he could remain in detention for up to six months without charge. “We are very disturbed by the mistreatment and continued detention of Rami Aysha and call for his immediate release,” said Committee to Protect Journalists’ Executive Director Joel Simon, in an alert released yesterday. “Journalists in Lebanon must be able to work freely during this critical time in the country’s history.”