

Assassination of Yanar Mohammed, Iraqi feminist human rights defender

written by Elahe Amani | March 16, 2026

On the morning of March 2, 2026, as Yanar Mohammed was leaving her home in Baghdad's Al-Bunouk district, she was targeted in an armed attack. Two assailants on a motorcycle fired several shots at close range. Although she was immediately transferred to the hospital, the severity of the wounds to her head and chest prevented doctors from saving her life.

Yanar Mohammed: A life of Courage, a Legacy of resistance

The assassination of Yanar Mohammed on March 2, 2026, in Baghdad is not merely the killing of a feminist activist; it symbolizes the continuation of structural violence and systematic repression that has overshadowed Iraqi society for years. A society in which nationalist-religious ruling forces and their affiliated militias have not only dominated economic resources and state institutions but have also taken citizens' civil and political freedoms hostage through various tools of repression. In such an environment, protest and demands for rights are often met with bullets, imprisonment, torture, and physical elimination.

Within this context, women, who make up half of Iraqi society, face multiple layers of discrimination and violence. In addition to the broader social problems of poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, they must also confront deeply rooted gender discrimination. Laws influenced by tribal traditions and conservative religious interpretations frequently limit women's basic rights. Phenomena such as honor killings, forced marriages, domestic violence, and trafficking of women still exist in many parts of Iraq, and victims often lack adequate legal and social protection.

Under such conditions, women who advocate not only for women's rights but also for values such as freedom, secularism, and social equality face even greater risks. Feminist activists, and human rights defenders in Iraq are not only subjected to social pressure and constant threats but are frequently targeted directly by armed groups and extremist forces. In recent years, targeted assassinations of political and civil activists have become a method of silencing dissent.

In this context, Yanar Mohammed was one of the most prominent figures in this struggle. Born in 1960, she was an Iraqi architect and graduated from the Department of Architecture in 1984 and completing a master's degree in 1993. The war and sweeping international sanctions imposed on Iraq during the 1990s severely destabilized Iraqi society and created widespread economic hardship. As living conditions deteriorated and opportunities for professional and civic life diminished, Mohammed and her family left Iraq. In 1995, she relocated to Canada with her husband and young child, joining a growing Iraqi diaspora shaped by displacement and exile.

While living in Toronto, Mohammed became active in diaspora networks concerned with the situation in Iraq. In 1998, she founded the **Defense of Iraqi Women's Rights**, a Canadian-registered NGO dedicated to raising international awareness about the worsening conditions facing Iraqi women during the sanction era, including poverty, reduced access to education and employment, and increasing exposure to social and domestic violence.

Her activism later expanded beyond advocacy to direct intervention. In 2001, she helped establish a

women's shelter in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to support women fleeing forced marriage and gender-based violence. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the collapse of state institutions, Mohammed returned to Baghdad and founded the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), which became one of the most prominent feminist organizations working to defend women's rights and carried out extensive efforts to combat violence against women, honor killings and human trafficking amid the country's post-war political and social transformation.

One of Yanar Mohammed's most significant initiatives was establishing the first network of secret safe houses for women whose lives were in danger. At a time when the Iraqi government refused for years to legally recognize such shelters, this network managed to save the lives of hundreds of women threatened by domestic violence, tribal retaliation, or attacks by armed militias. This courageous initiative made her one of the most well-known women's rights activists in the region.

Yanar Mohammed was also a strong advocate of secularism and the separation of religion from the state. She repeatedly spoke out against the influence of extremist religious currents in Iraqi politics and warned about the dangerous consequences of religious interference in civil law. Her outspoken criticism of religious fundamentalism and regional political influence made her a target for extremist groups.

Her extensive work in the field of human rights also received international recognition. In 2016, she received the Rafto Human Rights Prize, and in 2018 she was named by the BBC as one of the 100 most influential women in the world. Nevertheless, despite this global recognition, her life was constantly under threat.

An insightful article by **Dr. Mehiyar Kathem Al Sa'edi**, published on March 7 via *Counterfire*, offers a glimpse into her grassroots authenticity and leadership. As he writes: "A distinctive aspect of OWFI under Mohammed's leadership was its commitment to grounding feminist activism in the lived experiences of Iraqi women. In contrast to many newly established non-governmental organizations that operated primarily within donor-driven frameworks, Mohammed sought to ensure that OWFI's work remained closely connected to the social realities of Iraqi communities. She was particularly critical of the increasing professionalization of the NGO sector, arguing that civil society work could become detached from genuine social transformation when it was primarily structured as a career-oriented field supported by international funding.

To counter this tendency, Yanar actively recruited and employed women who had previously sought refuge in OWFI's shelters. Many survivors of violence eventually became staff members or volunteers within the organization. Over time, the organization developed a structure in which women with direct experience of gender-based violence played a central role in shaping the organization's activities. This approach reflected Mohammed's belief that feminist activism should empower those most directly affected by injustice."

Her grassroots activism, authenticity, and unwavering commitment to feminist principles were reflected in her organization's decision to decline the **U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage Award** in 2017. The decision underscored her political integrity and critical stance toward the consequences of the Iraq war. On the website of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), she stated: "*OWFI refuses to accept the award from the U.S. government, which was responsible for the destruction that occurred in Iraq and the ongoing violations against the lives and freedoms of Iraqi women.*"

Yanar and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) faced heightened public scrutiny and backlash in a society where such agendas were widely contested. With little to no domestic funding available for women's rights work more than two decades after the invasion of Iraq, OWFI

remained heavily dependent on foreign support, which often required adopting the language and priorities set by international donors. Responsible for sustaining OWFI's expanding work—including six shelters—Yanar found herself navigating growing political and social pressure, including legal petitions calling for the organization's dissolution. Despite these mounting challenges and attempts by authorities to restrict OWFI's activities, Yanar Mohammed continued her work with remarkable determination.

Just a day before her assassination, an untimely passing, she and her colleagues organized and participated in a conference in Baghdad addressing sex trafficking and accountability for crimes committed against women by members of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Yanar Mohammad was a secular, grassroots feminist leader who combined outspoken advocacy with frontline protection work for Iraqi women and girls. Despite persistent threats, restrictions on her movement, and repeated death threats, she remained courageous and steadfast in her mission. Pragmatic and deeply service-oriented, she dedicated more than two decades to protecting women at risk and played a direct role in safeguarding hundreds of women from domestic violence and honor killings.

Yenar was among a generation of women human rights defenders whose values resonated strongly with Iranian feminists and human rights activists. Left-leaning, visionary, and authentic in her leadership, she maintained an unwavering commitment to defending women's rights in Iraq and confronting violence against women in both private and public spheres, including abuses carried out by state authorities and through tribal practices.

She always expressed strong solidarity with Iranian feminist activists and frequently spoke about the destabilizing role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Iraq. The shockwave of her assassination extended well beyond Iraq's borders, raising troubling questions about the safety of this generation of feminist activists across the region and the growing risks faced by women human rights defenders in fragile political contexts.

After her tragic assassination, many human rights defenders, civil society organizations, and freedom-loving forces in Iraq and around the world honored her memory. They believe that although the enemies of freedom were able to take her life, they cannot silence the voice that rose for justice and equality. The name and memory of Yanar, a women human rights defender and a fierce critic of political Islam, will remain forever in the collective memory of freedom movements in the region.

May she rest in power!