

Iraq - Media Landscape

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Introduction

Iraq represents a quite singular example among Middle Eastern media landscapes, as it has been forcibly transformed from a secluded Baath-Party-run context into a liberalised one where hundreds of outlets compete for audience and few independent voices face a daily struggle to circumvent state and partisan pressures. What makes it peculiar is actually the way this development was triggered, that is by the US invasion of 2003, which still casts its alien shadow over a set of institutions that were established to back up “democratisation” efforts.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein exacerbated pre-existing sectarian and political tensions, intertwined with the local and international dimensions of the dispute over the country's enormous natural resources, that are predictably mirrored in the Iraqi media. Therefore, the majority of the outlets are financially tied to the Iraqi political forces with limited room for independence. At the same time, the ubiquitous state control, a legacy of 45 years of multifaceted totalitarianism (1958-2003), has not faded away with the downfall of Saddam, leaving its trademark on the way most Iraqis perceive the role of media (as a propaganda tool) and creeping into trade unions, regulatory bodies, legal loopholes and media practices in general. This does not mean that the current situation can be equated with the Baathist regime, it is more telling of the groundless assumptions of the US-led coalition that the removal of Saddam would have immediately paved the way for a liberal ruling class and of a resilient popular conviction that the media should portray Iraq in a positive light. According to a BBC Action survey conducted in nine Iraqi Shia-majority southern provinces in 2012, 97 percent of the respondents believed that the media should contribute to creating a sense of pride and national unity. The Iraqi government is currently dominated by Shia political forces.

For what concerns the development of media markets, even though the country saw advertising expenditure grow by more than 85 percent in 2011, according to the Dubai Press Club-Deloitte Arab Media Outlook, Iraq remains a context where companies are reluctant to invest because of the security costs. It is not a coincidence that a major market analysis like the Arab Media Outlook covered Iraq for the first time only in its 4th edition in 2012, before excluding it in [2016-18](#). The weight of advertisement is still quite limited in light of an excessive reliance on state or party funding, which has also resulted in limited performance incentives. Unlike ads-free party media, independent outlets struggle to make ends meet by relying solely on advertising (which consists mainly of telecommunications companies); furthermore, until 2008, [when PM Nuri al-Maliki decided to reduce government advertising in the press](#), the state-derived revenues of independent newspapers were still estimated to range between 40 and 70 percent. The economic straits have thus coerced several platforms into accepting the support of politicised pressure groups that have little interest in objectivity.

With regards to mass circulation, for sure post-Saddam Iraq has witnessed a radical transformation from a country where satellite dishes were completely banned to one where almost every household has one. Internet coverage still lacks behind most other Arab countries though and the security situation continues to hamper the circulation (and sale) of newspapers and the development of functioning infrastructures. Since 2003, Iraq has basically remained in a state of perpetual conflict with few medium intensity breaks followed by the latest descent into open war between pro-government forces and the self-declared Islamic State (IS) in mid-2014. The ongoing violence has displaced numerous citizens and hindered their access to radio, TV and the Internet. According to a Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG)-Gallup study conducted in late 2014, more than one-quarter (27.0 percent) of Iraqis confirm having been displaced in the previous 12 months, with a larger proportion hailing from [IS-controlled areas](#).

In such a challenging context, the achievements of Iraqi journalism should not be underestimated, including the production of investigative contents and public service TV programs. However, the efforts of the most skilled Iraqi media practitioners are not supported by a fully-fledged educational and professional environment; university studies on journalism are still heavily affected by weak broadband and precarious electricity and the road to access the job market is fraught with danger, especially in the case of war coverage, due to almost inexistent contractual guarantees and lack of trainings.

A premise should be added about the Iraqi Kurdish media landscape, which will be briefly discussed later on. A nationally framed profile should not be the place for discussing Kurdish media, as their audience is a transnational one, which is the reason why they will not be the focus of this study. However, some of the Kurdish outlets are fully engaged (together with their political sponsors) in the media war for Iraqi hearts and minds and, in some cases, they explicitly target an Arabic audience with Arabic programs. The discourse on mass circulation, media markets, legal frameworks, censorship and the

hardships of journalistic education applies also to the Kurdish context, although with differences ensued from almost 30 years (1991-2017) of *de facto* autonomy.

Lastly, this is not the place for an in-depth analysis of IS media, even if the group still controls significant swathes of Iraqi territory and it has recently built an [impressive media apparatus](#). The reason for not discussing IS at length here is to be firstly traced in its transnational dimension that would require us to delve into global jihadist media, stretching the scope of this research way beyond the Iraqi and Kurdish contexts. Secondly, most of IS propaganda does not target an Iraqi audience, but a global one of potential foreign fighters who do not speak Arabic. IS mainly operates on social media, whose audience is particularly limited in a country with weak Internet coverage like Iraq. Thirdly, the aforementioned discourse on mass circulation and other aspects of institutionalised media contexts hardly apply to the iron fist-controlled “caliphate” territories, where it is impossible to conduct surveys and interviews.

1. Media

1.1 Print

“Cairo writes, Beirut publishes and Baghdad reads” is an old Arab saying; nonetheless, today, the Iraqi readership does not live up to its historical legacy anymore. The Mesopotamian country has a literacy rate of 79.7 percent according to CIA Factbook 2015 estimates, but an IREX 2012 survey reveals that while almost all of its citizens (97 percent) rely on national TV channels for news on a weekly basis, about two thirds of the population (61 percent) do not bother to read a newspaper. The decline of interest for the press can be attributed to a number of factors, including the hazards of distribution, the increased accessibility of television for the less educated components and the factionalism of many government and party newspapers.

According to the same IREX survey, the professionalism of journalists is the primary criterion used by Iraqi readers to evaluate the press, followed by the independence from government and party pressures; the conclusions drawn from these parameters are particularly bleak, given that the percentage of Iraqis who rely on print media to follow the news has dropped from 64 percent to 39 percent between 2011 to 2012. According to a study conducted in 2011 by Isma'il Hussein Haddad, a Master student enrolled at the Department of Media Studies of the University of Dhi Qar, 40.44 percent of newspapers do not disclose their sources, with the worst ranking given to the state-run *As-Sabah* and the best to the independent *As-Sabah al-Jadid*; independent dailies score therefore better in spite of the exclusive access to sources that is normally granted to Arab state-run newspapers. This in a context where, unfortunately, government and party-controlled media account for a significant share of the market.

IMN-funded *As-Sabah* usually competes with the independent Pan Arab *Az-Zaman* for the title of the most read Iraqi daily, according to the same IREX survey. However, the IMN support was soon translated into US interference, which prompted *As-Sabah* editor-in-chief Isma'il Zayer to quit in protest against the lack of independence in 2004. Zayer decided to bring along part of the newsroom staff and found the independent *As-Sabah al-Jadid*. Since then the magazine has achieved considerable success, reaching the readership levels of *As-Sabah* and *Az-Zaman* in 2010 (IREX 2012).

As-Sabah had instead to deal with the political agenda of its sponsors, who imposed the marginalisation of the crimes committed by the US occupation. The Bush administration even proceeded to infiltrate some of the most respected independent newspapers (*Az-Zaman*, *Ad-Dustur*, *Al-Mada*) through [articles written by the Lincoln Group](#), a company hired by the Pentagon, which were sold as if they were the work of Iraqi freelancers. In this way, the Coalition's psyops ended up damaging the credibility of new media.

Following the 2005 elections, *As-Sabah* came to be perceived as a propaganda tool of the Shia parties in control of the government. Between 2012 and 2013, *As-Sabah's* biased coverage of [the protests that shook the central Sunni regions](#), as if all demonstrators were hardcore Baathists, left no doubt about whom it was siding with. It is still to be considered a popular newspaper, not by virtue of its objectivity, but because of the significant size of the electoral base of the ruling parties

The liberalisation of the press has also given rise to a series of publications financed by Islamic and ethno-nationalist parties who have nothing to envy to *As-Sabah* in terms of partisanship. Among the top names of the Shia Islamist party outlets there are *Jaridat ad-Da'wah* (belonging to *ad-Da'wah*), *Al-'Adalah* (Ammar al-Hakim's Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq - ISCI, now a member of the Citizen Bloc), *Ishraqat as-Sadr*, *Al-Hawzah al-Natiqah* (belonging to the Sadrist movement led by nationalist cleric Moqtada as-Sadr) and *Al-Bayyinah al-Jadidah* (previously known as *Al-Bayyinah* and owned by the Iraqi Hezbollah, which is particularly close to Tehran).

In the Sunni hemisphere, the number of newspapers is more limited; the purges of the most prominent Baathist figures, along with the Sunni boycott of the 2005 elections and the sluggishness of the Sunni clandestine networks in comparison with their Shia counterparts under Saddam, are all factors that have hindered the flourishing of a Sunni party press. The only significant exceptions are the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (*Hay'at al-'Ulama' al-Muslimin fil-Iraq*), the highest Sunni Iraqi authority, which controls the daily *Al-Basa'ir* and the Iraqi Islamic Party, that is the local Muslim Brotherhood branch, which was already printing the issues of *Dar as-Salam* in the '70s, during its London exile. *Dar al-Salam's* partisan rhetoric is at times mitigated with appeals for reconciliation, but its sectarian agenda is quite evident .

There are also independent sheets that struggle to maintain good levels of credibility and contain political pressures. The most well known, even outside Iraq, is the Pan Arab *Az-Zaman*, which is part of Saad Bazzaz's media empire. After a career as one of the leading figures of the Baathist Ministry of Information, Bazzaz emigrated to the UK in 1992, where he launched *Az-Zaman* in 1997. In 2003, when it became politically possible for him to resettle in Iraq, the newspaper was already well established internationally.

As several other independent Iraqi media, *Az-Zaman* gave in to politically motivated funding to ease financial constraints: Saudi Arabia supported the newspaper, as revealed during the libel lawsuit filed against the newspaper by one of the wives of the Qatari Emir, Shaykha Moza, in 2005. Nevertheless, it maintains good levels of professionalism, with a fair degree of criticism of the Gulf monarchies' poor human rights standards and the performance of Iraqi political elites.

Another independent newspaper which enjoys a good reputation is Bassem ash-Shaykh's *Ad-Dustur*. The owner is known for critical views of Iranian meddling in Iraqi politics and in 2008 the Iranian embassy threatened to sue him. *Ad-Dustur* cannot be merely labeled as pro-American, but the ash-shaykh's editorials reveal a complacent attitude towards Washington.

Al-Mada sits among the few left-wing avowedly secular newspapers. It was established in 2003 by Fakhri Karim, a Kurdish businessman and former adviser to ex-Iraqi President and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)'s leader Jalal Talabani. In the world of information, some accuse Karim of promoting the interests of the Kurdish autonomous region by virtue of its close relations with Talabani and KRG president Massoud Barzani. While the attitude of *Al-Mada* was merciless against Maliki in the last years of his mandate, the Kurdish opposition went practically ignored on its pages, with exclusively positive references to the [status of human rights in Kurdistan](#). Having said that, *Al-Mada* tends to maintain a non-partisan profile and boasts a singularly diverse offer of eight cultural inserts that deal with sports, history and entertainment.

1.2 Radio

Iraqi radio was established in 1930. The interest of the Iraqi ruling elites for radio dates back to King Ghazi, who established *Radio Zuhoor*

in 1937. Way before the military rule of the likes of Qasim, Saddam and Jamal Abdun-Naser in Egypt, radiostations were already conceived as platforms to launch tirades against regional rivals and King Ghazi used to call for the annexation of Kuwait on the frequencies of *Radio Zuhoor* (Saddam echoed him on *Republic of Iraq Radio* ahead of the Gulf War). Before the fall of the monarchy (1958), the radio airwaves were employed for a proper war of words between Naser and the Western-backed Baghdad Alliance, with the Egyptian iconic leader calling for the toppling of the Iraqi king on *Sawt al-Arab* (Voice of the Arabs) radio and Baghdad hitting back by jamming the Egyptian station and launching a rival project called *Sawt al-Haqiqah* (Voice of Truth).

In the '80s, under Saddam, "Iraq used to possess a very impressive array of powerful transmitters and modern antennas for both domestic and external broadcasting, nearly all of which was destroyed in the Gulf War," writes Finnish broadcast journalist and DXing expert Mika Makelainen. In light of this legacy of technologically advanced self-reliance, it is worth noting that, nowadays, most of the successful radio stations are foreign-backed initiatives: According to the aforementioned IREX survey (2012), US-funded *Radio Sawa Iraq* is the most listened radio station in Iraq on a weekly basis, followed by *Baghdad Radio* and another US-backed project, *Radio Nawa*. Another quite successful initiative is Basra-based *Al-Mirbad*, which has received British and American funding. It is the largest BBC Media Action project in Iraq and, according to BBC Action 2013 figures, boasts a weekly listenership of 1.7 million as "the most listened-to local radio station in southern Iraq and arguably the only independent public service radio station in the country."

Under the mission of creating a Western-styled public service, there is a great number of foreign radio and TV broadcasters targeting Iraqi audiences (*BBC*, Paris-based *Monte Carlo Doualiya* radio, US-backed *Al-Hurra TV* and *Radio Free Iraq* among others). Many of them can be listened via local relays. Since 2003, according to US Congress figures, the American NGO that operates *Al-Hurra* and *Radio Sawa*, the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), has been the beneficiary of approximately \$870m for all of its projects across the Middle East; MBN's Director of Communications Deirdre Kline told BBC Action that around 14 percent of this budget has been spent on Iraqi radio and television. Such an investment is partially driven by soft power calculations that preceded the US invasion and still pursue the goal of moulding a Western-friendly public opinion; before the arrival of satellite TV, [clandestine radio airwaves](#) were the only access to the outer world for Iraqis and Washington was fully aware of that when supporting the establishment of *Radio Free Iraq* in Prague in 1998, or that of *Radio al-Mustaqbal* (Future Radio) in 1996, the broadcasting arm of the anti-Saddam Iraqi National Accord (INA). The major Iraqi actors who had interests in the downfall of the Baathist regime, namely the Kurds and the Shia Islamist parties, also placed their bets on radio guerrilla. The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq's *Voice of Islamic Revolution in Iraq*, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)'s *Voice of Iraqi Kurdistan* and the PUK's *Voice of the People of Kurdistan* were only some examples.

Today, in the context of visual media, radio has clearly lost its pivotal role: 35.1 percent of Iraqi households possess a radio, lagging consistently behind satellite TV (97.3 percent) and Internet (50.4 percent), according to the Gallup-BBG 2014 report; 19.7 percent of the Iraqi respondents reported using the radio for news weekly, in comparison with 92.1 percent using the television for the same purpose. The importance of radio in delivering news is still significant, but its use is most common among men, better-educated Iraqis and Kurds, turning it into a sort of niche media.

Other noteworthy radio stations include the longstanding state-run *Republic of Iraq Radio*, the private Baghdad-based *Voice of Iraq*, the private talk radio *Radio Dijla*, whose studios are also in the capital (*Dijla* is the Arabic name for the Tigris river) and *Sumer FM*, an affiliate of *As-Sumaria TV*. A collective of Mosul exiles has recently set up [Al-Ghad](#) radio station to reach people in their IS-controlled city and facilitate communications between those who are still trapped there.

1.3 Television

Similarly to the press, the TV landscape reflects the political and sectarian division of the Iraqi society.

Baghdad is a channel that deals mainly with Sunni-majority regions, being funded by the Iraqi Islamic Party. In 2007, after mourning the death of Saddam, its studies were temporarily shut down by the Iraqi authorities. The *Baghdad* schedule is obviously dominated by Islamic themes

Among Shia political forces, the ISCI controls three channels: *Al-Furat* in Baghdad, *Al-Nahrayn* in al-Kut, both satellite stations, and the terrestrial *Al-Ghadir* in Najaf. The main station, *Al-Furat*, offers a rich selection of Shia religious programs. In its shows, even the most common difficulties faced by young Iraqis, such as wedding expenses, become a pretext to promote the financial benefits made available by ISCI to its voters.

Al-Iraqiya is part of state-funded IMN, just like the *As-Sabah* newspaper. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Baathist regime, this terrestrial station initially maintained its primacy over the national share, as Iraqis possessed no satellite dishes, but their rapid diffusion meant he had to compete soon with the independent *Ash-Sharqiya*. In one recent survey on the channels watched nationwide in a single week (Gallup-BBG 2014), the three most popular TV stations emerged to be *Al-Iraqiya* (68.8 percent of the respondents), followed by two independent platforms, *Ash-Sharqiya* (65.2 percent) and *As-Sumaria* (58.1 percent).

Similarly to *As-Sabah*, *Al-Iraqiya* came to be perceived by its detractors first as the CPA mouthpiece and then as the puppet of the Shia-dominated cabinets. Being a public broadcaster that should address all Iraqis, the paradox of the extensive space reserved to Shia Islamic programs cannot go unnoticed.

Ash-Sharqiya was founded by millionaire Saad al-Bazzaz. In 2007, the channel was forced to shut down and move to Dubai because of its [allegedly "sectarian" coverage of the death of Saddam Hussein](#). Consequently, *Ash-Sharqiya's* critics consider it a pro-Sunni broadcaster.

Another popular independent station is *Al-Fayhaa*. It started broadcasting from Dubai, but in 2006 it resettled in Sulaymania, in the Kurdish autonomous region. Despite a dramatically polarised political environment, the channel's schedule also features contents that are intentionally conceived to defuse tensions between Kurds and Arabs in the [contested regions](#). Furthermore, *Al-Fayhaa* targets Kurds and Arabs in both languages.

Al-Baghdadia is based in Cairo and was founded by Aoun Hussein al-Khashlok, a businessman of Nasiriya who is sometimes described as a former Baathist that enriched himself in a suspicious way. What is certain is that *Al-Baghdadia* maintains a sharp and irreverent approach to Iraqi politicians, as well as a secular consciousness which is particularly critical of political Islam.

As-Sumaria is located in Beirut and it distinguishes itself for one of the most objective conduct in the Iraqi TV landscape. The channel refrains from using emotional and politically charged terminology, referring to fallen security members as "dead" (*qutla*) and not as "martyrs" (*shuhada*), while using the term "armed men" (*musallahun*) for those branded as "terrorists" (*irhabiyyun*) on other channels.

Lastly, *Ad-Diyar* is a terrestrial television that was inaugurated in 2004; the director is the former head of Baathist radio and television, Faysal al-Yasiri. Recently, as a result of economic problems, Yasiri attempted to sell the channel to former Iraqi PM Ayyad Allawi, before opting for the support of one of Maliki's trusted businessmen, Usam al-Asadi. Another confirmation of how difficult it is for independent outlets to stay afloat without political donors.

Editorially, it is worth noting that independent channels like *Ad-Diyar* and *As-Sumaria* rarely show live images of the aftermath

of suicidal attacks, demonstrating a greater interest for social issues and entertainment programs. The latter include satirical shows and the horoscope, which is sometimes condemned as an un-Islamic content.

In order to produce entertainment shows, more formats are imported from abroad, including foreign TV series (*musalsalat*). Some of the most popular stories feature nonconformist traits and draw on present anti-heroes, such as *Ash-Sharqiya's* famous series *Dhi'ab al-Layl* (Night Wolves), which narrates the deeds of a group of Iraqi kidnapers. In other cases, the *musalsalat* are designed to exorcise collective Iraqi traumas, like in the case of *Al-Maz*, a series broadcasted by *As-Sumaria* and set in one of the most notorious security branches of the Saddam era. The subject is clearly still topical, if one considers [the allegations levied against Maliki of running secret prisons](#).

The other main category of non-breaking news programs featured on independent channels can be best described as public service. In this case, similar programs can also be found on *Al-Iraqiya* and the Islamist channels *Baghdad* and *Al-Furat*. One of the most common format is the hosting of a government official to respond to questions from the home-based audience or to those raised by the presenter during an investigation. The debated issues include the poor status of infrastructures and services in Iraq. Some independent stations seem thus to be aware that, as historian Ibrahim al-Marashi has pointed out, the instigation to sectarian strife can be countered by producing TV contents that provide an alternative to everyday violence.

1.4 Digital Media

Iraq's Internet development lags way behind that of other Arab states with the exception of war-torn Yemen and Syria. In 2011, the Dubai Press Club-Deloitte Arab Media Outlook estimated that broadband penetration reached as little as 0.1 percent of the Iraqi population. Yet, according to BBC Monitoring, Internet penetration has grown significantly quickly between 2014 and 2016. In 2016, Internetlivestats.com has detected 4.9 million Iraqi Internet users, around 13 percent of the population. The BBG-Gallup 2016 joint research has also found that the number of Iraqi Internet users is on a rise due to better mobile network coverage. Mobile penetration was already assessed to cover 87 percent of the population in 2011, according to the Arab Media Outlook. Having said that, TV remains the most popular media in both Iraq and KRG, with the autonomous region scoring better, since 72 percent of its homes are served by an Internet connection. In fact, [Alexa.com figures](#) show that, in Iraq, the only non-international websites among the top-ten for visitors are two Kurdish news websites, *Dwarozh.net* (5th) and *NRT TV* (7th).

One of the most brilliant Iraqi digital journalistic initiatives is to be credited to *Niqash.org*, clearly not because of the number of visitors, but for the quality of its contents. Since 2005, this network of young Iraqi journalists from all over the country has provided in-depth coverage of diverse social, political and cultural issues, shedding light on forgotten geopolitical disputes (such as [the plight of the Iraqi marshes and the related role of Turkey and Iran](#)) and peripheral [land grabs](#). The platform is trilingual (Arabic, English and Kurdish) and it has been supported by Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT), a Berlin-based media development NGO. In February 2017 *Niqash* had to temporarily stop its activities due to funding constraints, a plague that has affected many other media projects that are too dependent on short-term grants with limited sustainability.

1.5 Social Networks

Similarly to the rest of the [Middle East](#), Facebook and WhatsApp are the most popular social media in Iraq; Facebook statistics show that the number of users in Iraq has increased by 35 percent in the last six months of 2012, reaching around 2.7 million in early 2013. According to the BBG-Gallup 2016 survey, 46 percent of Iraqi Kurds turn to Facebook at least once a week to read the news, making of Zuckerberg's social network one of the top five news sources in the autonomous region. According to Socialbakers.com, the most popular Iraqi TV station on Facebook is *Al-Baghdadiya* (which ranks 7th among all Iraqi Facebook pages worldwide), followed by the Kurdish news website *Xendan* and *Rudaw*, the latest KDP-funded media

network launched in 2013. *As-Sumaria* TV is the most visited profile on Twitter. Outside the KRG, YouTube seems on the rise as a news source with 19 percent of Iraqi Arabs accessing the website at least once a week, in comparison with only 9 percent of the Kurds (BBG-Gallup 2016). Nevertheless, the BBC Media Action 2012 survey reported that only 8 percent of respondents in the nine southern provinces had accessed the Internet in the last month. Moreover, 76 percent said they had never used a computer in their life. The relevance of social networks in terms of opinion making and agenda setting is therefore still limited and the ongoing conflict continues to deprive many residents of any web access, thus complicating more detailed assessments.

1.6 Opinion Makers

After the US invasion, Iraq boasted a thriving blogosphere of well-educated [English-speaking bloggers](#), some expatriated while others still living inside the country. Most of them were men in their twenties and thirties with some prolific female writers as well. They hailed from different ethnic and religious backgrounds but, because of their middle-upper class urban origins, they could not be representative of the whole spectrum of Iraqi society. However, they did reflect the Iraqi society's post-Saddam divisions, ranging from his staunch supporters to those who had been waiting their whole life to see the dictator ousted. During the US occupation, the most famous of all these bloggers has undoubtedly been the architect Salam Abdul-Munem, who is better known by the name of his blog *Salam Pax*. Salam became a worldwide celebrity by virtue of his Baghdad-based insights before and after the invasion, which were regularly featured on *The Guardian*. He has subsequently stopped writing and, at the moment, he works for UNICEF in Beirut. Needless to say, there is also an active Arabic-speaking blogging community discussing all sort of issues, even though it is hard to keep track of who remains active in the long-run. For this reason, some passionate readers of Iraqi blogs decided to set up several archival websites to document their activities. However, the fact that two of the main archives (*The Iraqi Blog Count*, *Iraqi Blogger Central*) have almost totally suspended their activities in 2009, noticing a decline of interest for blogging, is probably indicative of a shift in the type of platforms used by influential Iraqi opinion makers. In the end, in Iraq as elsewhere, the array of available social media have gradually attracted most well-known writers without any need to resort to blogging anymore.

Some political figures have employed successfully social media, such as [Ammar al-Hakim](#), whose Facebook page is the 4th most followed Iraqi account worldwide, according to Socialbakers.com. As for YouTube, the crown of popularity is firmly in the hands of [Basem al-Karbalai](#), an extremely popular Shia eulogy reciter. He's followed by the [Al-Basheer Show](#), a satirical program broadcasted by the Kurdish independent *NRT TV* and *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, which aims to defy sectarian politicians and religious leaders. Other political, media and religious figures score particularly well in terms of followers on Facebook and they include the late Kurdish [Shaykh Ahmad Kaka Mahmud](#), (who was among the founders of the Salafi Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM) and [whose page](#) is still managed by his devoted followers), Shia cleric Abdul-Hamid al-Muhajir (one of the most televised religious figures in Iraq) and veteran *Al-Jazeera* correspondent [Amer al-Kubaisi](#) (who has covered Iraq since the beginning of the US occupation). The website of Ayatollah Sistani, the highest Shia religious authority in Iraq, is the most visited Iraqi website in the world, according to Alexa figures. Journalist Saif Salah al-Hiti, who hails from Anbar and has a column on *al-Jazeera*, is the most popular Iraqi writer on Twitter (Socialbakers.com). Al-Hiti is also known for his deep admiration for the Amazigh-Berber culture, a position that differentiates him from many Pan Arabist colleagues.

1.7 Sources

Newspapers

- [Ad-Da'wah](#)
- [Al-Adalah](#)
- [Al-Basa'ir](#)

- [Al-Mada](#)
- [As-Sabah](#)
- [As-Sabah al-Jadid](#)
- [Az-Zaman](#)
- [Bahra al-Diya'](#)
- [Dar as-Salam](#)

Radio

- [Al-Mirbad](#)
- [Radio Baghdad](#)
- [Radio Sawa](#)

Television

- [Ad-Diyar](#)
- [Al-Baghdadiya](#)
- [Al-Fayhaa](#)
- [Al-Furat](#)
- [Al-Ghadir](#)
- [Al-Iraqiya](#)
- [Ash-Sharqiya](#)
- [As-Sumaria](#)
- [Baghdad](#)

Digital Media

- [Niqash.org](#)

Opinion Makers

- [Iraq Blog Count](#)
- [Iraqi Bloggers Central](#)
- [Salam Pax](#)

Kurdish Media

- [At-Taakhi](#)
- [Awene](#)
- [Gali Kurdistan](#)
- [Hawlati](#)
- [Khabat](#)
- [Kurdistan TV](#)
- [Kurdistan24](#)
- [KurdSat](#)
- [NRT TV](#)
- [Radio Nawa](#)
- [Rozhnama](#)

- [Rudaw](#)
- [Speda TV](#)
- [Zagros TV](#)

2. Organisations

2.1 Trade Unions

As mentioned earlier, the Iraqi Journalists' Syndicate (IJS) is more of a relic of the Baathist regime rather than an institution to defend journalists' rights. Under Saddam, the IJS even crowned his elder son Uday Hussein Journalist of the Century.

In recent times, the trade union has been hit by countless scandals, the most blatant being the offer of lands in exchange for favourable coverage of the government. The episode was the focus of a [New York Times](#) piece (January 28, 2009), which reported of a meeting occurred between PM Maliki and the IJS, a month before the provincial elections. In this gathering, reporters were promised plots of land almost for free in exchange for articles highlighting "progress and reconstruction." The problem is that, legally speaking, the text of 1969 Syndicate Law actually rules that the union should "strive to build housing and provide land for the members" (clause 13). Theoretically, all professional syndicates are entitled to these privileges but, practically, this case was unprecedented and, for a while, the IJS remained the only beneficiary of the law. The trade union is said to be particularly influential on the upper echelons, as confirmed by former IMN general director Mohammad Shaboot in 2013, who told BBC Action of a government-funded budget of approximately \$7m per year. Furthermore, the current president of the union, Mu'ayyid al-Lami, has been accused by the editor-in-chief of the independent daily *Al-Mada*, Fakhri Karim, of having been gifted more than \$3m by the prime minister to back his candidacy for the third term in 2014.

The IJS shortcomings are not limited to its cosy relationship with the political elites, it is also completely incapable of protecting media professionals. According to an in-depth report conducted by Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ)'s Mustafa Sa'adun in collaboration with the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO) in 2016, among 20 Iraqi war correspondents who were assigned to cover the war against IS none of them had signed a work contract nor did they receive any training on war reporting. This violates Article 13 of the Law on the Protection of Journalists (2011) which provides that "local and foreign media entities working in the republic of Iraq must commit to sign contracts with journalists working for them according to a form set by the Syndicate or through its branch in the region. A copy of the contract is to be submitted to the Syndicate." Asked about the reasons of its negligence, the IJS blamed the Iraqi media entities for not committing to sign the contracts, while claiming to retain tens of signed contracts without showing any of them. JFO director Ziyad al-Ajili has compared the hiring of journalists to "masked extortion" because of the lack of IJS-endorsed legal frameworks and unified contract formats. The ARIJ investigation, which was also published in the Pan Arab daily [Al-Hayat](#), has also casted significant doubts on the IJS trainings on war reporting, given that the syndicate refused to share a list of the supposed trainees and some major media outlets denied receiving any training.

The Iraqi journalists have decided to react and organize themselves in an alternative body. In spite of the threats he received, *Al-Mada Media Network* manager Adnan Hussein is now the president of a new syndicate, the National Union of Iraqi Journalists (NUIJ). This new institution has vowed to fight to amend the 1969 law on syndicates that forbids the formation of more than one union. However, the parliament has failed to vote to change the text until now. Obviously, IJS's Mu'ayyid Lami has already resorted to the old law to question the NUIJ's right to exist, accusing it of igniting divisions and benefiting "foreign agendas." On the contrary, Mazen al-Zaidi, a newly elected NUIJ member, has told *Al-Monitor* in [a 2013 interview](#) that the IJS' legitimacy to represent journalists on its own is totally questionable on the grounds that many of its more than 10,000 members are not journalists at all, but they have been appointed to ensure Lami's re-election. The IJS has indeed kept alive

many of the dissolved Ministry of Information's practices such as granting memberships to government spokespersons: For example, Al-Maliki's Communication Advisor Ali al-Musawi, has joined the syndicate after obtaining his office with the cabinet.

2.2 Journalist Associations

The Iraqi civil society did not stand still in front of the IJS' failure to protect journalists, on the contrary, it has successfully organised itself in several organisations, in some cases thanks to the support of INGOs.

The aforementioned Journalistic Freedoms Observatory (JFO) was set up in Baghdad in 2004 and it now has a branch also in the US. Its activities include the launch of campaigns to denounce violations, the provision of legal and cyber-security support, as well as escorting foreign journalists in Iraq and facilitating the residency procedures. On its website, the JFO explicitly recognizes the US crucial role in shaping the Iraqi "free media" after Saddam. The observatory is supported by International Media Support, Reporters Without Borders, the Doha Centre for Media Freedom and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Another noteworthy association is the Press Freedom Advocacy Association in Iraq (PFAAI), which was previously known as the Society for Defending Press Freedom in Iraq. In 2013, the PFAAI, in partnership with the Iraqi Network for Social Media (INSM), an Iraqi network of bloggers and citizen journalists and a second civil society organisation called Iraqi Street, have successfully lobbied the Iraqi parliament to [block the enactment of a repressive cyber law](#) (Draft Informatics Crimes Law) that stipulated fines of up to \$40,000 and penalties of up to life imprisonment.

2.3 News Agencies

The case of the *National Iraqi News Agency* (NINA) is a good example of how a great deal of Iraqi media projects have struggled to make ends meet and resist to partisan cooptation, once the donor's funding dried out. NINA was set up by IREX with USAID funds in 2005; the plan was to develop a sustainable news agency within three years by cashing in subscription fees from Iraqi media. However, the project failed to generate enough commercial revenues and, when the USAID funding was over, NINA was compelled to look for a new patron. Eventually, the heavily politicised Iraqi Journalists' Syndicate (IJS) accepted to support the agency, thus incidentally fulfilling one of its objectives listed in the 1969 law as "the establishment of a news agency." What was supposed to become a commercially viable public service was therefore turned into the IJS media arm.

The fate of *Aswat al-Iraq* (Iraq's Voices) was even bleaker, as the agency had to stop its services around four years ago, probably due to financial constraints. It was originally established in 2004 thanks to UNDP funding, with the additional support of Internews and the Reuters Foundation. In Kurdistan, noteworthy news websites and agencies include [Shafaq News](#) and pro-KDP *Zagros News Agency*.

Finally, *Amaq* is believed to be the Islamic State's news agency, even though the connection has been refused by the jihadist group. The agency's press releases are usually redistributed by US-based SITE Intelligence Group and regularly quoted by major international news organisations. In line with IS' advanced technological know-how, *Amaq* has already launched a mobile app and a Telegram account. The Iraqi media's version of the events in the context of the war on IS is regularly disputed by *Amaq* accounts. At first sight, what strikes is that this agency appears much more dynamic and actively engaged on social media than the aforementioned Iraqi official news agencies.

2.4 Audience measurement organisations

In the Arab world, there are no reliable data on audience and budgets, mainly because illegal access to satellite television is

particularly widespread and broadcasters themselves are far from being transparent about their financial assets. Arab media scholar Donatella Della Ratta was interviewed by the author of this study in March 2016. Asked about audience statistics, she commented: "The recording of data on audience remains problematic in the Arab world: We mainly rely on surveys and data released by the internal marketing departments of the same TV channels. These stations often exert considerable pressures on audience measurement organisations and disseminated data should be taken with a grain of salt, especially when you do not know the methodology behind that." Iraq is no exception to this, there are no local audience-measurement organisations and even the aforementioned IREX figures might not be totally accurate. Furthermore, the Mesopotamian country remain an understudied case if compared with other Arab states (and especially with the hi-tech Arab Gulf markets) because access to its media market is still largely hindered by security concerns.

2.5 Sources

Trade Unions

- [Iraqi Journalists' Syndicate \(IJS\)](#)
- [National Union of Iraqi Journalists \(NUIJ\)](#)

Journalist Associations

- [Iraqi Network for Social Media \(INSM\)](#)
- [Journalistic Freedoms Observatory \(JFO\)](#)
- [Press Freedom Advocacy Association in Iraq \(PFAAI\)](#)

News Agencies

- [Amaq News Agency](#)
- [Aswat al-Iraq](#)
- [National Iraqi News Agency \(NINA\)](#)
- [Zagros News Agency](#)

3. Policies

3.1 Media legislation

Iraq still lacks a law on the right to access information and even if it were to pass one of the drafts currently being discussed in the parliament, there would be a need for further legal reforms to enable media practitioners to hold authorities accountable. Specifically, as pointed out by the Iraqi Civil Center for Studies and Legal Reform in a [2015 study](#), state employees are still strictly forbidden from providing any information without the approval of their superiors according to Law 14, 1991.

In 2013, a law on the right to access information has instead been passed in Iraqi Kurdistan. All Kurdish parties reached a subsequent [consensus](#) on a crucial amendment that specified some exceptions to the law, according to which state institutions have the right to withhold sensitive security and military information and citizens are entitled to refuse the provision of certain information on privacy grounds. Some legitimate concerns have been raised with regards to the limits that this amendment can cause to the transparency of KRG institutions. According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) there is still [room for improvement](#), especially for what concerns testing

the harm of the aforementioned exceptions, introducing a mechanism that would allow to consult third parties, enforcing sanctions against the obstruction of access to information and protection for good-faith disclosures. The IFJ and CLD have also proposed the creation of a monitoring commission for information appeals rather than leaving this function to the existing KRG Human Rights Commission. In practice, there is still also a significant gap between the progressive legal framework and the willingness of KRG officials to engage constructively with the media.

In the rest of Iraq, a Journalist Protection Law was approved in 2012. When it was in draft form, the bill was subject to criticism for applying only to IJS members. Nonetheless, when the law was finally approved, the earlier reference to the IJS was cancelled, so that a journalist is now qualified as “any individual practicing a full-time journalism job.” But, in this way, citizen journalists, bloggers and part-time journalists remain excluded. The law stipulates forms of compensation for death and injury, while protecting journalists from being arrested or interrogated without a warrant and without alerting their employers; however, benefits and eligibility for compensation for work injuries apply only to IJS members and there is no mention of any entitlement to legal aid.

According to Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR) editor in Iraq, [Hazim al-Sharaa](#), there are still evident loopholes in the interpretation of certain vaguely phrased passages: The law does not define the “restricted” data and statistics that journalists are not entitled to obtain, just like it does not specify which other laws the journalists are obliged to respect when publishing information. The latter is a particularly controversial passage bearing in mind that some ancien régime laws are still in place, such as the 1969 Penal Code, which criminalizes defamation and the 1968 Publications Law, according to which journalists may be imprisoned for up to seven years for insulting the government. Without amending these old laws, the positive impact remains almost unnoticeable. Quite predictably, the pro-government Iraqi Journalists' Syndicate has endorsed this legal reform, whereas other local and [international organisations](#) have called for its repeal.

3.2 Accountability systems

Iraq is ranked [158 out of 180 countries](#) in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2016 World Press Freedom Index. It was downgraded by two positions in comparison with 2015. In spite of this already stifling context, Iraqi media contents need to be regulated - not censored - to stem the widespread diffusion of sectarian propaganda. By law, the limits imposed on the contents are those loosely set out by the Constitution approved in 2005, which guarantees press freedom, as long as no one violates “public order and morality.” A deliberately vague condition that allows arbitrary punishments.

To avoid incurring in government crackdowns, journalists resort frequently to self-censorship. As state employees, the IMN staff is held accountable by political authorities without many incentives to act independently. The reform of IMN and the consequent improvement of its journalistic standards, is thus dependent on rearranging its budgetary agreements with the Iraqi government. In other words, it is dependent on cutting the umbilical cord between media and state coffers without disrupting social safety nets.

Even in the more liberal KRG context, the government remains wary of independent media. In 2008, the independent daily *Hawleti* was targeted with a 13m Iraqi Dinar lawsuit for publishing an article on the abnormal extent of Barzani and Talabani's personal wealth. In 2010, the government demanded compensation amounting to \$1bn and the closing of Gorran-controlled *Rozhnama*, because of an article on oil smuggling to Iran. Journalists continue to be subject to intimidation, if not kidnapped and killed, when they dare to criticize the 'sacred' Barzani and Talabani families. This was the fate of the student Sardasht Osman, who was murdered for mocking the Barzani family on the web in 2010. No justice was done on his case, which was officially dismissed as a crime committed by Mosul-based Islamist cells.

3.3 Regulatory authorities

Under the CPA, the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the INGO Internews took the lead in shaping the regulatory system, pressured by the need to set rules for a booming media industry. In January 2004, the FCO media team developed a framework for an independent regulatory body, the Communications and Media Commission (CMC), to be in charge of telecommunications and media licensing. The commission was also entrusted with the definition of ethical boundaries for freedom of speech, safeguard against media incitement and [monitoring during elections](#). The new body's sustainability was centred on the revenues received from its telecoms and broadcast licenses and it was expected to return any excess to the Iraqi treasury. Print media did not require a licence under the new regulation, but the CMC's mission was to encourage freedom of expression and professionalism of the press by drafting an ethical code in partnership with the journalistic staff and developing a self-regulating mechanism to implement the code.

The new Iraqi Constitution granted the CMC a certain degree of independence, connecting it to the legislation branch only. According to Article 103, the CMC was also established as a financially and administratively independent institution. The prime minister nominates the CMC board members, whose appointment needs to be approved by a parliamentary majority. Public officers and political party members cannot be elected as board members.

Nonetheless, according to the BBC Action 2013 policy briefing, the Iraqi political class was scarcely receptive to the concept of a non-profit independent regulatory body and the media themselves saw the need to apply for a licence as a restrictive measure in the post-Saddam era.

On one hand, the CMC failed to tone down hate speech through its mandate. In 2012, for example, when Iraq witnessed a peak of brutal killings of Emo youth, at least one channel (PM Maliki's *Al-Masar* TV) broadcasted a report underlining the alleged common traits between Emos, Freemasonry, Zionism and Satanism. It was a clear call for more blood, when Emos were being [stoned to death by Shia militias](#) for being "Satan worshippers" and the CMC did nothing about it.

On the other hand, the Iraqi government resorts selectively to the commission to muzzle opposition media. In 2013, for example, [Maliki shut down ten TV channels](#), mostly from the Sunni opposition, by revoking their CMC licence. Licenses can be denied on grounds of "morality and public behaviour", replicating the flaws of the constitutional text. Furthermore, on its website, the CMC clarifies that it "has the right at all times to omit or amend these [ie its own] principles and provisions to promote the public interest," thus casting a shade on its commitment to be an independent regulatory body.

After a state of emergency was declared amidst the IS offensive in June 2014, the CMC issued [its "mandatory" guidelines for media "during the war on terror"](#), a set of nebulous instructions to control coverage. One stipulation called on media to "hold on to the patriotic sense" and to "be careful when broadcasting material that [...] may express insulting sentiments" or does "not accord with the moral and patriotic order required for the war on terror." According to a Freedom House 2015 report, these guidelines have resulted in inaccurate reports on the conflict, claiming IS had been defeated in Tikrit while the city was still controlled by the militants. Iraqi Kurdish media received similar instructions.

3.4 Sources

- [Article 19 Analysis of Journalist Protection Law](#)
- [Communications and Media Commission \(in Arabic\)](#)
- [Full Text of Iraqi Constitution \(2005\)](#)
- [Kurdistan Iraq: Full Text of Law on Right to Access Information \(in Arabic\)](#)

4. Education

4.1 Universities and schools

Higher education in journalism is consolidated in Iraq, but it has remained largely disconnected from global developments since the 1970s. Several universities and colleges offer two-to-four-year degrees in journalism (such as the University of Baghdad, the Salahuddin University and the Technical Institute, both in Erbil). The programs include undergraduate, master's and Phd options.

Following the US invasion, UNESCO has implemented a program whose goal is to adapt its Model Curricula for Journalism Education to the Iraqi context. These Curricula have been conceived, according to UN terminology, as a guide for "developing countries and emerging democracies" and they have been discussed with Iraqi deans, faculty members and senior ministerial administrators to adapt them to the Mesopotamian context. The findings of this debate on educational reform between UNESCO-funded consultants and Iraqi academics have been published in an essay in 2012.

Technology remains a challenge in areas like Baghdad, where computers, broadband Internet and electricity (and therefore air conditioning in the terribly hot Iraqi summer) cannot be taken for granted. The privileged residents of the Green Zone are actually among the few Iraqis who enjoy 24/7 electricity. In some cases, students have to purchase mobile data packages to access Internet on campus. As for Iraqi Kurdistan, facilities are generally better equipped technology-wise (also due to long-standing stability in comparison with the rest of the country), but there is often a lack of qualified instructors.

A major problem in education is that the Ministry of Higher Education is scarcely accommodating toward the preferences of students, who are assigned specific majors regardless of their interests. This has resulted in increasing frustration among the student body. During the meeting, Iraqi educators have also highlighted the need to update classes on media law, make the most of technology by introducing also distance learning and convert a predominantly theoretical approach into a more practical one that includes "hands-on" assignments.

As for distance learning, the Ministry of Higher Education maintains a sceptical position in consideration of the mushrooming of "degree mills" after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Consequently, credits earned through online courses are not recognised in the Iraqi schooling system. UNESCO considers this a lost opportunity that would allow virtual correspondent internships in journalism schools, while being aware that distance learning remains challenging with such a disrupted Internet coverage. Even though infrastructures are poor and under constant threat because of the ongoing conflict, mobile telecommunications are ubiquitous and data packages widely available in major cities (CIA Factbook 2009 stats rank Iraq as the 40th country in the world for cell phone usage with 47 percent of Iraqis using a mobile). The UN agency has therefore suggested to bank on mobile networks for distance learning purposes in consideration of the diffusion of cell phones and the better conditions of mobile networks in comparison with broadband.

4.2 Professional development

Job-shadowing, internships and project-based learning are not common practices in Iraq, as journalists often find themselves covering the ongoing war without any sort of training and contractual guarantee. This is the gloomy picture that emerges from the aforementioned ARIJ investigation conducted by Mustafa Sa'adun in 2016.

According to IJS and JFO figures, at the end of 2016, the victim toll was of 13 dead and 44 injured Iraqi journalists since IS conquered Mosul in June 2014, in comparison with not even a single injury among the 500 foreign and Arab journalists who

worked there over the same period. The numbers are self-evident in revealing the existing gap between Iraqi and foreign journalists in terms of security training. With regards to the trainings, NUJJ organised several of them, but nothing related to the coverage of war, while IJS claimed to have trained 300 journalists without producing any evidence.

It all starts with the hiring policies, because most of these young reporters are catapulted into the battlefield without seeing any contract; in some cases they receive a mere administrative recruitment order. The lack of binding clauses allows their employers to fire them whenever they like and without any prior notice. To make things even worse, the aspiring correspondents might be asked to sign a waiver that strip them of any financial compensation or right to file a lawsuit. Moreover, risking your life at the front can pay as little as \$35 per report. Now more than ever, with the media in constant need of 'human repository' to cover endless wars, the aspiring Iraqi reporters appear doomed to exploitation.

4.3 Sources

- [Erbil Administrative Technical Institute - Media Department](#)
- [Salahuddin University \(Erbil\) - Journalism Studies](#)
- [University of Baghdad - College of Mass Communication](#)

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

In light of the CPA's experience, it is difficult to imagine what alternative media landscape could have been shaped more successfully within the same time constraints. For sure, the occupying forces' top-down reforms have left an indelible mark on Iraq, paving the way for a more liberal media environment. The country has witnessed some unprecedented developments, redefining the limits of freedom of expression and shaping a legal and institutional framework that is more supportive of independent media. Mistakes have been committed, failing to eradicate some institutions and practices that date back to the authoritarian past and assuming that decades of history and perceptions could be forcibly reversed. Iraq is still coping with this legacy and change will come at its own pace. However, the Iraqi media stand today as one of the most rich and diverse contexts in the region, where differences are too often simplified and translated into a source of conflict. Strategies for the future growth of media markets cannot ignore the political and military situation, but they should also explore new ways of generating commercial revenues to resist the pressures of state and partisan donors.

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