

Global Communications

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Arab Media Systems





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5. Iraq: Media between Democratic Freedom and Security Pressures

Sahar Khalifa Salim

This chapter discusses the historical beginnings of the media in Iraq and how it has developed over time under Ottoman control and during the British occupation, which was followed by a dictatorial rule that has completely restricted the media. Since 2003, Iraq has entered a democratic era, which has fostered an openness and relative freedom in the media. However, because of deteriorating security conditions, widespread corruption, and the control exerted by political parties and religious movements over governance, freedom of the press in Iraq is globally ranked among the lowest in the index of press freedom.

Background

Iraq is considered the cradle of civilizations, where the earliest societies in the world were established, namely those of Mesopotamia. The most important of these were the Babylonian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, and Chaldean. One of the most important accomplishments of the Mesopotamian civilizations was the Sumerians' invention of writing. The first written laws were also issued in Iraq.

Great kingdoms were established in what is now Iraq, and they rendered the region an important state. Iraq was an important part of the Persian, Greek, and Roman empires. In the seventh century, it became an essential and integrated part of the Islamic world. In the

eighth century, Iraq contained the capital of the Abbasid State until the Ottomans took control of it. It remained under their control until the establishment of the new national state during the period of 1914–1918. After the First World War, and in light of a growing national awareness, the Iraqis enjoyed a kind of freedom, and newspapers tended to discuss politically controversial topics, but most of them were short-lived (Bakr, 1969).

In the twentieth century, the country experienced periods of stability and upheaval. The royal era from 1932–1958 is considered the most pluralistic one. During this period, many newspapers and magazines were issued that called for a free and independent state, and mobilized the citizens (Bakr, 1969). After a revolution in 1958, a republic was set up. The 1970s witnessed an improvement in the living conditions of Iraqis due to the nationalization of Iraq's oil resources in 1972, which had previously been run by a monopoly of foreign companies. In the 1980s, the Iraqi-Iranian war affected the economic and political conditions. It depleted the country's resources and created a schism among its citizens. The war ended in 1988, but it was followed by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, an action that led to another war, a war on Iraq led by the US, which began on 17 January 1991. The coalition air raids attacked the infrastructure of all the Iraqi cities, which led to total destruction. Moreover, three northern cities united to form an autonomous region called Kurdistan that has its own language. International military and economic sanctions followed due to the losses caused by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The embargo lasted for nearly 12 years and ended on 19 March 2003, when the US and the coalition states launched a war against Iraq under the pretext that it had weapons of mass destruction. The war ended with the US-led coalition's defeat of the Iraqi forces and the occupation of Iraq on 9 April 2003.

Iraq is a major connecting point between Europe, on the one hand, and Southeast Asia and Australia, on the other. The capital, Baghdad, is considered an important crossroads in the Middle East. Iraq is surrounded by Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and Iran. The area of Iraq is nearly 438,446 km². There are 18 Iraqi governorates. The region of Kurdistan consists of three of these: Sulaimaniya, Erbil, and Duhok. Although there were neutral areas that separated Iraq from Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, in addition to Shat Al-Arab

that separated Iraq from Iran, the change in the political system after 2003 affected Iraqi borders, and some areas were seized by neighboring countries such as Kuwait (Khalil, 2018). The population of Iraq amounts to more than 38 million. The capital, Baghdad, has the highest population with eight million people, representing 21% of the total population of the governorates. Nineveh comes second, with 10% of the total population, and is followed by Basra, with 8%. Those below 15 years of age represent 38% of the total population (Iraqi Ministry of Planning, 2018).

The Iraqi people are multiethnic, multilingual and multiconfessional, which strongly affects the diversity of its media landscape. Arabs and Kurds are the two major nationalities in Iraq. Arabs represent the majority of the population with nearly 75–80%, while the Kurds represent 12–18%. Other nationalities and ethnic groups represent 5%. Arabic and Kurdish are the official languages in Iraq. Arabic, however, is considered the primary language because 80% of the population speaks it. Kurds live in the northeastern regions, Sulaymaniya, Erbil, and Duhok, where they represent the majority. They also represent a small percentage of the population in Nineveh, Diyala, and Baghdad. Most of the Kurds are Sunnis. The most significant minority in Iraq are the Turkmen, who represent the third largest ethnic group. They live close to the Kurdish region in the cities of Kirkuk, Diyala, Nineveh, and Salahud-Din. The language of the Turkmen (a Turkish dialect) and Syriac are official languages in the administrative units where the Turkmen or Assyrians represent the majority of the population. There are other languages, including Mandaean, Sureth, Armenian, and Gypsy, which are used by minorities (Al-Husseini, 2008).

Islam is the religion of 95% of the population. Muslims are divided into two main denominations, Sunni and Shi'ite, but there are no official statistics defining the precise ratio. Christians, Mandeans, and Yazidis represent 5%. The Iraqi law acknowledges 14 official Christian sects. They are spread over different Iraqi regions, mainly in Baghdad, Erbil (in Ankawa), and Mosul (Nineveh plain). Currently, they have their own religious and political representation. Before the US-led coalition occupation in 2003, they numbered nearly 1.4 million. This number, however, has decreased due to continuous migration and the occupation by the Islamic State (ISIS) of Syria and Iraq, which also led to the displacement of the Christians. According to the estimations of

Christian organizations, between 250,000 and 300,000 Christians remain in the area. There are also the Zoroastrians, who had previously lived in Kurdistan and who belong to an ancient religion, Zoroastrianism, which had disappeared from Iraq, but reappeared after 2015 (Salloom, 2017).

Yazidis represent an ancient religious and ethnic group who lived mainly in northern Iraq, and specifically in the Sinjar mountain region northeast of Mosul on the Iraq-Syria border. Some of the Yazidis speak the Kurdish language, and some of them speak Arabic. During the rule of ISIS in this area, tens of thousands of Yazidis fled for their lives, and between 2000 and 5500 Yazidis were killed, and around 3000 kidnapped, by ISIS (Fidh, 2018).

Historical Developments

The beginnings of media in Iraq occurred with the publication of the first official newspaper in Baghdad. The first issue of *Al-Zawra'* was published in 1869, when Iraq was ruled by the Ottomans. It was established by Midhat Pasha, the Ottoman governor in Iraq. Issued in Arabic and Turkish, it was the Ottoman province's official mouthpiece. Soon after, *Al-Mosul*, a weekly newspaper, was issued in Mosul beginning in 1885. In 1889, *Al-Basra* weekly newspaper was first published in Basra. These newspapers continued to exist until the British occupation in 1917 after the fall of the Ottoman state at the end of World War I (Batti, 1961).

The British occupying forces controlled the press and journalism in Iraq. They achieved this by taking control of the public publishing houses and buying all of the private ones. They were then used for printing newspapers that promoted the consolidation of the British military rule. Consequently, all of the newspapers that had been published in the Ottoman era were closed, and new ones were established, the most famous of which was *Al-Awqaf Al-Basriyya*, which was followed by a two-page newspaper entitled *Al-Arab*. The content of these newspapers supported British policy in Iraq, which aimed to develop closer relationships with the Arabs and incite them against the Turks (Batti, 1985).

In 1918, Iraq was placed under the League of Nations mandate. According to the resolutions of San Remo, Iraq was placed under the British administration. Soon after that, the 1920 revolution began against

the British occupation. Journalism was the most effective media used by the Iraqis in their political struggle to achieve success in the revolution. In that period, newspapers prospered, and several newspapers were publishing content and opinions that opposed the British occupation. During that period, several political parties were established. These parties employed the partisan press to express their ideologies of politics and reform. Thus, there was a relatively independent media environment at that time (Al-Mashhadani, 2013).

The beginnings of radio broadcasting in Iraq go back to 22 March 1932, when the Iraqi government conducted the first experimental radio broadcast from 8:30–10:30 p.m. On 26 January 1935, the first short-wave Iraqi radio broadcasting station was established. Its program was announced in the official newspapers of that time. It included songs, music, and lectures. The official broadcasting of *Baghdad Radio* started in 1936. The program included anthems, news, and lectures. That station was closed several times, until a new regulation for the Iraqi wireless broadcasting was issued in 1937. It was followed in 1938 by the Radio Tax Law. After that, daily broadcasting started, but it could hardly be heard outside of Iraq. The British Forces that were established in Iraq had a positive effect on the development of broadcasting, as they provided Iraq with new radio transmitters that allowed them to establish new radio stations, such as the Kurdish radio station in Kirkuk in 1952. New foreign-language radio stations were also established in 1952 (Al-Rawi, 1992).

These media developments were followed by the beginning of Iraqi television in 1954 when the British BAY Company, while conducting an exhibition for manufactured and commercial goods, built a mobile television station in the exhibition area in Baghdad. This station started broadcasting different programs, including ice skating, music, dancing, and singing performances, as well as programs for children. The BAY Company ultimately presented the station to the Iraqi government in return for a contract to import the required resources for operating the station and training its personnel. On 4 January 1956, the first experimental broadcast of *Baghdad TV* was conducted. Its programs supported the policy and decisions of the Iraqi government, in addition to supporting its objectives and activities.

A revolution in July 1958 ended the royal era in Iraq. It marked the beginning of the republican rule that also ended the British Forces' existence in Iraq. A wide range of newspapers representing several political and ethnic segments of society appeared. Radio and television broadcasting improved. In 1963, *Baghdad TV* witnessed new technical developments, especially the introduction of video tapes. In 1967, the station's broadcasting reached all the Iraqi territories. It can be considered the first television station in the Middle East. Its programs were in Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Syriac languages (Radhi, 2010).

In 1968, when the Ba'ath party took over, the media were monopolized by the government. A newspaper was established to be the mouthpiece of the party, *Al-Thawra*. In 1975, Iraq witnessed television broadcasting in color for the first time. In 1979, Saddam Hussein became ruler in Iraq, and during his rule (1979–2003), the media were totally monopolized under his control.

The first satellite broadcasting of an Iraqi channel started in Iraq with the use of the Internet in 1998. Internet services were not freely accessible to everyone. At that time, they were controlled legally by the Iraqi government and were subject to high security measures. In addition, the infrastructure was not suitable for this service due to the international sanctions imposed after Iraq had occupied Kuwait in 1991. The subscribers amounted to 45,000 out of a total of 24 million Iraqis. Most of these subscribers were from official Iraqi institutions, and many were rich individuals because the subscription was very expensive. The State Company for Internet Services (SCIS), which belonged to the Ministry of Communication, managed that service. It designed the electronic sites for the Iraqi media, including the Iraqi News Agency and a number of the official newspapers. However, some electronic newspapers were poorly designed, and they concentrated only on essays and studies. On 27 July 2000, the first public Internet café was opened, but surfing was limited to the sites allowed by the Iraqi government.

The major change that occurred in Iraq and is considered a turning point in its political life was the establishment of a new political regime after the US-led occupation in 2003. The invasion turned the country upside down economically, politically, and socially. The new regime dismantled all military institutions and appointed a civilian governor.

New political and social institutions were established with a new system of election that led to a new governing regime based on a parliamentary system. A separation was established between the legislative and executive authorities. A new constitution was issued, most of which was derived from the Transitional Iraqi State Administration Law of 2004 that was set up under the so-called Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) directed by the US-imposed Provisional Governor, Paul Bremer. Its articles mainly drew on Western experiences, neglecting Iraqi realities on the ground (Ali, 2018).

Because of the war with the US-led coalition that ended with the occupation of Iraq in 2003, Iraq has witnessed major and deeply pervasive political, security, social, and economic changes. The security conditions deteriorated dramatically after the order of Provisional Governor Bremer, which dismantled the public security institutions, the first of which was the Iraqi army. That order led to sectarian fighting that ultimately resulted in the deterioration of almost all public and health services. These consequences further led to a large brain drain due to assassinations, threats, and extortions, where significant numbers of qualified Iraqis left the country.

In 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a terrorist organization, occupied three major Iraqi governorates—Mosul, Anbar, and Salahud-Din—and declared it to be an “Islamic state”. It recruited militants from various countries all over the world to fight with it. A war against ISIS ensued, involving many international and regional powers until ISIS as an occupying entity was declared defeated in Iraq at the end of 2017. Still, during the fighting whole cities were destroyed and have not yet been rebuilt, and many people were killed or displaced.

After 2015, the economic condition of Iraq also deteriorated due to the decline in international oil prices, as well as pervasive political, economic, and administrative corruption in most of its public institutions (Transparency International, 2018). That corruption, nevertheless, has continued after oil prices have risen again. Moreover, according to the latest report issued by Transparency International in 2018, Iraq scored only 18 out of 100 points, ranking 168 out of 180 states, thus indicating an extremely high level of corruption.

Political System and Legal Framework

With the US-led occupation in 2003, a new political system was established in Iraq. The authoritarian regime of the dictator Saddam Hussein, who had ruled for 35 years, collapsed. The characteristics of the new Iraqi political system were enshrined in the articles of the Iraqi Republic's Constitution of 2005, namely, Articles 1, 5, 6, and 47. Article 1 states that "the Republic of Iraq is a single federal, independent and fully sovereign state in which the system of government is republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic."

After 2003, Iraq gained the freedom to establish political parties and gatherings. While for decades there had only been one party allowed, in the parliamentary elections of 2018, almost 204 parties, entities, and political movements were registered (Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq, 2017). The governing regime has also been renewed as Iraq has become a parliamentary democratic federal republic, a system of pluralism. The executive authority is executed by the prime minister as the chairman of the cabinet. There is also a president for the republic. The legislative authority is handled by the Iraqi parliament.

After 2003, the relationship between the political system and the media changed. At that time, the Provisional Governor immediately ordered all the media institutions to be dismantled and their staffs dismissed. He issued Order No. 6 in June 2003 to establish the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) as a replacement for the dismantled Ministry of Information. Orders No. 65 and 66 were drafted and issued in March 2004 to provide a suitable legal basis to organize the Iraqi media. In the introduction for Order No. 65, the National Communications and Media Commission was established to be responsible for granting licenses, organizing the telecommunications services, broadcasting, transmitting, and organizing information services and Iraqi media. Order No. 66 directed the establishment of the Iraqi Commission for Broadcasting and Transmitting Services.

The CPA initially hoped to establish the IMN as a copy of the BBC model, with the aim for it to become an independent professional and transparent commission. This model, however, was diverted from its independent path when the IMN started to adopt the government's positions. This occurred because the President of the IMN was appointed

by the government or the governing party, and its board was appointed according to a sectarian quota. The public media, which Bremer had tried to set up to follow the BBC model, quickly turned into a state media organ par excellence. The current IMN has its own budget which is formulated by parliament. It is also financed by advertisements, programs, and artistic works it produces, sells, and broadcasts. The IMN comprises three television channels—*Al-Iraqiyya*, *IMN News*, *IMN Sports*—, three radio stations—*Republic of Iraq*, *Furqan*, and *Iraqiyya Radio*—, a Media Training Institute, and the *Al-Sabah* newspaper and *Al-Shabaka* magazine. The IMN employs more than 3,000 individuals.

All the previous constitutions from 1925, 1958, 1964, 1968, and 1970 notably included texts about freedom of expression and the press, although they were bound by a group of written laws. For instance, the Publications Law No. 206 of 1968 allowed the authorities to impose their sponsorship on all newspapers, magazines, and books, which required previous approval. There was also the modified Iraqi Penal Law No. 111 of 1969, which included more than 30 criminal defamation articles. According to this law, the penalty for expressing or publishing one's opinions may amount to capital punishment, life or temporary imprisonment, confiscation of movable and immovable property, etc.

Also, after 2003, several laws were issued to regulate the media in Iraq, such as Order No. 14, which was issued by the CPA. It defined limitations to the freedom of expression. For instance, the third section of this order states, under Detection of Prohibited Activities, that "the administrator may authorize on-site inspections of Iraqi media organizations' work without notice, in order to ascertain compliance with this order and to seize any prohibited materials and any production equipment and seal off any operating premises." In accordance with Order No. 65, the National Commission of Communication and Media was established to regulate radio broadcasting and to grant licenses for broadcasting. Notably, the order also granted the freedom to establish newspapers without the need for licenses by any entity; thus, anyone in Iraq could publish a newspaper (Al-Sarraj, 2017).

Nevertheless, the previous laws that restricted the freedom of the press, or posed dangers for that freedom in Iraq, are still valid in the judicial system. These laws subject journalists to arrest and excessive fines, especially in the present articles, such as those known as the

Defamation Articles in Law No. 111 of the Iraqi Penal Law of 1969. The latest law is the Rights of Journalists Law, issued in 2011, whose provisions include a number of contradictions with reality, and which allows for muzzling and politicization of the media.

Governmental or official institutions, especially the Media and Communication Commission, issued orders to temporarily restrict freedom of opinion and the media, especially during the large-scale protests in 2019. For instance, the letter issued by the Media and Communication Commission at the end of 2018 was addressed to all the press institutions in Iraq and informed them of the necessity to stop any abuses of national and religious symbols.

Some satellite channels were closed down, such as the *Baghdadiya*, *Al-Babiliya*, and Qatari *Al-Jazeera* channels in Iraq. The websites of the Qatari owned *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, and the Saudi-owned *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspapers, and a number of news agencies were blocked due to their criticisms of the performance of the Iraqi government.

Beyond the laws, there are security factors on the ground which affect the media more strongly. While doing their job, especially when covering demonstrations, protests, or acts of violence, journalists are exposed to security threats such as harassment and attack. According to a report issued by the Defending Freedom of Press in Iraq Society, 231 journalists were subjected to 207 acts of harassment during the period from 3 May 2018 to 3 May 2019. These included five arrests, 17 detainments, 30 assaults, various preventions and hindrances of coverage by government officials or their bodyguards, and nine armed attacks on journalists and media institutions. Some of these violations were against civil activists and political analysts; furthermore, a group of journalists was detained for criticizing the government (Sadoon & Tariq, 2019).

Economy and Ownership Patterns

Nearly 95% of the finances included in the state's general budget for the Iraqi economy depend on Iraqi crude oil revenues. The budget thus depends on how high or low oil prices are. Consequently, this affects the individual and national income. With the increase in oil exports in the period from 2004–2014, and the availability of enormous financial resources, many newspapers and media institutions became active.

They employed many journalists; however, they were often run by unqualified administrations and had no sustainable business plans.

Governmental subsidies offered to the media are limited to only the official IMN media. Most of the media in Iraq are financed by parties, political and religious movements, state officials, and businessmen, in addition to foreign entities which come from Arab, regional, or neighboring states, such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The economic crisis hit Iraq in 2015 hard and heavily affected most media institutions. Several daily newspapers and some satellite television stations were forced to close down because of bankruptcy. Some others were forced to change from print publications to digital websites. Other groups downsized their staffs or reduced the number of publications.

With the beginning of the economic crisis in 2015, many international organizations and entities stopped supporting the media. The private sector, moreover, deteriorated, and there was a total dependency on importation. Consequently, local advertisements for products weakened. In addition, the state stopped encouraging investors to advertise. Thus, the media lost a major source of income. This crisis was also reflected in the journalistic content: it was employed as propaganda for powerful entities in the government and those political parties that financed the media. This has also affected the media genres that are currently being invested in.

At this point, there is no print medium with effective and wide circulation that can continue to exist solely on its revenues. Yet, there are some papers that have continued to be published despite the economic crises and bad security conditions that have affected Iraq since 2003. The *Al-Sabah* newspaper, which is financed by the state and which is the leading newspaper in Iraq, publishes fewer than 6,000 copies. There are other papers that publish from 1000–4000 copies. As for radio stations, their broadcast range is limited to the major cities, and they are ineffective in reaching the wider Iraqi community. In addition, most of them are financed by political and religious parties and movements. However, there is a significant number of nearly 55 satellite television channels with wide circulation inside Iraq. Yet, each channel has its own segment of viewers because they follow specific political and religious parties and movements, and thus they promote specific perspectives through ethnic and confessional lenses. Since 2003, Internet service has become

available to all citizens. Consequently, electronic sites have become widespread. Most traditional Iraqi media have their own websites on the Internet. Moreover, social media sites, such as *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*, have become widespread.

Ownership of Iraqi media can be divided into three types: public, private, and partisan. The public type is in fact controlled by the Iraqi government because the IMN is financed by the Iraqi parliament, and the government indirectly mandates the written policy decisions of the media controlled by this network. Private and individually owned channels, such as the very popular *Al-Sharqiya*, which is owned by the pressman Sa'ad Al-Bazzaz, *Huna Baghdad*, which is owned by the businessman Fadhil Al-Dabbas, *Ur*, which is owned by the businessman Ma'mool Al-Samarra'i, and *Al-Sumariyya*, which is owned by a Lebanese businessman, as well as the *Al-Mashriq* newspaper, represent their owners.

Freedom given to their employees, therefore, is restricted by the policies and orientations of their editors-in-chief and owners. The third type, the partisan, is the most common in the Iraqi media. Here, parties or political individuals own the media institutions. Partisan media are omnipresent, and they are generously financed. Such media, however, are known for giving editorial directions to their employees and publishing propaganda for the party or entity that owns them. In Iraq, there are 204 registered parties and political entities, and many of them have their own media. Everyone working at such an outlet has to abide by the written policy specified by the president of their network, who represents either a party or a political entity. The employees work in line with the written policies derived from the political orientations of these parties.

There are nearly 15 satellite channels owned by Shi'ite parties and entities, whereas Sunni parties or influential individuals own nearly 11 channels. For example, influential members of Shi'ite parties, such as the Islamic Dawa Party, own satellite channels, including *Afaq*, which is owned by ex-prime minister Noori Al-Maliki, *Al-Masar* which is owned by Abdul-Kareem Al-Inizi, and *Al-Rasid* which is owned by ex-prime minister Haydar Al-Abadi. There are also the satellite television channels including *Al-Furat*, owned by the Hikma Movement, and *Al-Ghadeer*, *Biladi*, *Al-Na'eem*, *Al-Ahd*, *Al-Nujaba'*, *Al-Ittijah*, and *Asia*.

All these satellite television channels represent political orientations close to Shi'ite interest groups in Iraq. A distinction between these satellite channels can be made according to affiliation, ownership and financing, and according to their discourses that closely correspond to the discourses of the influential parties behind them (Al-Ruwashdi et al., 2010; Iraqi Media House, 2015). There are, moreover, the satellite television channels *Karbala*, owned by the Shi'ite Endowment, *Al-Salam*, owned by the Shi'ite religious man Husayn Al-Sadr, *Ahl Al-Bayt*, owned by Shi'ite religious authority Hadi Al-Mudarrisi, and *Al-Wala'*, owned by the Popular Mobilization Forces.

TV channels that reflect a Sunni partisan orientation in Iraq are, for example, the satellite television channels *Baghdad*, owned by the Islamic party, *Al-Fallooja*, owned by the businessman and politician Khamees Al-Khanjar, head of the Arab Project, *Dijla*, owned by the Al-Hal movement headed by Jamal Al-Karbooli, and *Al-Rasheed*, owned by the businessman and politician Sa'ad Asim Al-Janabi.

There are, moreover, satellite television channels, such as *Al-Hadath*, owned by the religious man Abdul-Lateef Al-Hmayyim, who also supervises *Diwan*, which is owned by the Sunni Endowment, and *Al-Rafidayn*, which is owned by the Muslim Scholars Commission that opposes the Iraqi government.

In the region of Kurdistan, the Kurds own some other channels which work separately from the local Iraqi media because of their preference for the Kurdish language which is used in this region, unlike in the other Iraqi governorates. They are, however, no different from the other Iraqi media with regards to the freedom they are permitted. Influential Kurdish parties in Kurdistan own these media, and they are the ones who decide on their content, which most often identifies with their political ideologies and orientations. There are Kurdish satellite television channels, such as *NRT*, owned by Shiswar Abdul-Wahid—head of the New Generation Movement in Kurdistan—, *Zagros*, owned by the Kurdish Democratic Party, *Ruwudaw*, owned by Masood Barazani, and *Al-Mishraq*, owned by the Feili Kurds.

Furthermore, there are many radio stations that belong to these satellite television channels, are promoted by them, and are owned by the same owners. As for newspapers, they are the least popular medium, although they follow the orientations of the institutions that own them.

For instance, *Al-Sabah* newspaper and *Al-Shabaka* magazine belong to the public IMN; *Al-Zaman* newspaper is owned by the Al-Zaman Institution, which also owns the *Al-Sharqiya* satellite television channel. There are also other newspapers that are owned by political and religious parties and movements.

Technology and Infrastructure

As for technology, Iraq is still lagging behind compared with international standards. This can be attributed to several factors, including wars, political conflicts, and economic crises. Iraq is also lagging behind in comparison to other Arab states regarding the use of technology in its public institutions. The technology used is basically limited to various routine procedures.

According to a study conducted by Akamai, which is an institution specializing in the Internet, Internet services in Iraq are poor and very expensive (NRT, 2019). Internet speed in Iraq is only 0.75 megabytes per second. Yet, the demand is high—there were more than 19 million Internet subscribers in 2019, which is half of the population. They mostly use social media sites to access information, news, and analysis. Iraq does not have a state company for communications to control cyberspace in the country, so it is a largely unregulated and free space. At the end of 2019, however, and responding to massive anti-government protests in Baghdad and the southern provinces, the government cut off Internet connections completely to prevent the demonstrators from communicating with each other.

At the same time, the state also does not invest in infrastructure. In Iraq, there are three mobile communication companies, *Zain*, *Asia Cell*, and *Korek Telecom*, all of which are private companies, some with stakeholders from abroad. Mobile phone penetration is quite high, with 95% of the population subscribing to mobile phones.

The semiofficial media, such as the IMN, which owns television channels, radio stations, and newspapers, are technologically developed because they are sufficiently financed by the state. Some of the other media, which are owned either by parties, religious and political individuals, or businessmen, have developed technology and modern programs, while others work with comparably more modest capabilities.

Some media, moreover, have modern studios and cameras with HD broadcasting, sites on social media, and digital applications on smart phones.

Traditional techniques are still used in Iraqi media. These include more basic technology and working methods. Press coverage still employs traditional methods with audio and digital camera videos, while 3D technology is not in use. Drones and cloud computing, which are usually used to cover events in dangerous or critical areas, are also not used.

In covering the news, satellite television channels use traditional audio and video techniques with digital cameras, film cameras, editing, and photography programs. Modern techniques of virtual studios in news broadcasting, however, are employed by only one channel in Iraq, namely *Al-Furat*, which is owned by the National Hikma Movement headed by Ammar Al-Hakeem.

Progress is slow in the use of modern technologies in the media. This is because they are expensive, especially the virtual studios and the use of artificial intelligence for editing and presenting. In most of these media, the financing resources are weak.

Challenges

In Iraq, the political conflict among the parties and political and religious blocs, which is covertly motivated by Shi'ite-Sunni and Arab-Kurdish conflicts to acquire power, represents the main obstacle to the progress and sustainability of the media. This conflict hinders the media's professionalism and neutrality in enhancing democracy and the values of coexisting, diversity, cultural and religious pluralism. This is negatively reflected in the content of these media, most of which have started to support and follow specific political ideologies or serve individual political or religious interests so that they have become arenas for political accusations, political overthrow, and incitement during sectarian crises. Most of the political entities have adopted media owned or financed by themselves as propaganda to promote their ideologies at the expense of free journalism. Thus, journalists cannot deviate from the policy adopted by their own institution for fear of losing their jobs. In addition, in Iraq, the capital is monopolized by the political and religious parties, which restricts the wider development of the media.

Yet the most severe challenge that hinders freedom of the media in Iraq is the state of security conditions. There are terrorist groups and organizations, such as ISIS, which have succeeded in occupying three major Iraqi governorates. Due to the deterioration of security conditions after 2003, journalists were killed simply for being present in fighting areas. After 2017 and the liberation of the cities, journalists faced further challenges, namely harassment, arrest and physical attack by security forces and militias in Iraq. Some political entities have tried to restrict freedom of expression because journalists covered demonstrations and protests against bad services and pervasive corruption, for instance in Basra and some other Iraqi cities. Thus, there are not enough guarantees for journalists to work free from political pressures. The legislative and executive authorities are unable to protect journalists. The constitutional articles are not enough to protect freedom of expression, unless followed by executable legislation.

Outlook

With the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the propaganda and media wars that surround Iraq—whether those between the USA and Iran and between Israel and Arab states, or those in Yemen or Syria—keep the Iraqi media controlled by political powers that direct the Iraqi authorities. Consequently, the media remain politicized and not neutral. Many of their arguments do not reflect the Iraqi people's suffering. These media cannot progress until they are freed of the politicians' control, and until the media are allowed to serve the public. The media have to be neutral to play an active and effective role in uncovering corruption and establishing the concepts dedicated to freedom. The rights of journalists must be guaranteed by law, and these laws need to be implemented. The professional administration of these media should be encouraged. Access to information needs to be guaranteed. The IMN and its media institutions must be freed from government control in order to realistically serve the public. This can be achieved by encouraging advertising, and requiring those companies investing in Iraq to advertise in the Iraqi media. Moreover, the local media inside the cities need to be better supported in order to be viable media alternatives capable of representing these cities and local regions.

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