

Iraq's News Media After Saddam: Liberation, Repression, and Future Prospects

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A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

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 **CIMA** Center for International
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 **National Endowment
for Democracy**
Supporting freedom around the world

After the ouster of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, Iraq's tightly controlled state-run media underwent a transformation on two fronts: one driven by the Americans who made establishing a free press a priority; the other by an Iraqi citizenry that for three decades had been cut off from the free marketplace of ideas under a tyrannical regime.

Overnight, Iraq's media landscape blossomed into one of the most diverse and unfettered press environments in the Middle East. Privately owned news outlets grew from zero to more than 200 in a rush to meet demands for uncensored information.

Satellite dishes, banned under the Baathists, flew off the shelves. Iraqis, once limited to government-run broadcasting and five newspapers, suddenly had access to a smorgasbord of news from CNN and Qatar-based al-Jazeera to dozens of publications and television channels springing up in their hometowns.

Iraqi journalists who defected during the Baathist era returned. Saad al-Bazzaz, former head of state television and editor of a leading newspaper under the old regime, fled in 1992 and ran a publishing business in Great Britain catering to exiled Iraqis. Soon after the invasion, he moved his operation to Baghdad. Al-Bazzaz told London's *Independent*, "We can't train staff fast enough ... People are desperate here for a neutral free press after 30 years of a totalitarian state."

This euphoria over a "neutral free press" was short-lived.

The reality on the ground today is a far cry from what Pentagon planners envisioned for Iraq's reconstituted press system. Despite massive infusions of cash from the U.S. government for media development—more than a half billion dollars by most estimates—the future of the country's media does not look promising on several fronts. Many of Iraq's media outlets have become mouthpieces for ethno-political factions with the potential to inflame sectarian divisions that have led the country to the brink of civil war. In his groundbreaking study on Iraq's press system, Middle East scholar Ibrahim al-Marashi

warned that "ethno-sectarian 'media empires'" were providing the psychological groundwork for bitter divisiveness and conflict and needed to be addressed for the sake of the country's stability.

Any escalation of violence would be bad news for journalists who already work in a climate of terror and impunity. A record number of media professionals, the majority of them Iraqis, were killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2008, making it then the world's deadliest spot for the press. Those who target journalists have little reason to worry. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, none of the 93 murders of journalists that have occurred in Iraq over the last 10 years have been solved. Iraq's press corps has faced setbacks on other fronts.

The Iraqi government has employed laws from Saddam Hussein's era to muzzle media as well as some put on the books by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) during the occupation. The Iraqi Media Network (IMN) and Communications Media Commission (CMC), part of the CPA's makeover of Iraq's press system, were turned over to the government years ago. Both were designed to foster free expression and

provide a multiplicity of views. It has not always turned out that way.

The CMC has used its regulatory powers to shutter media operations and restrict news coverage.

The judiciary also has been used to silence media. Iraqi news organizations continue to be plagued by lawsuits brought by the highest powers in government to intimidate and, in some cases, close them down. Journalists have been arrested, their equipment confiscated, and exorbitant fines leveled against them. All this has been occurring in a country ranked the fourth most corrupt in the world by Berlin-based Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

February 2011 was a terrible month for Iraq's journalists.

As protests swept the country, Iraq's security forces turned on them with a vengeance. Nalia, Kurdistan's first independent TV station, had been filming unrest in Sulaymaniyah when 50 masked gunmen raided the studio, destroying equipment and setting the building ablaze. Three days later, men in uniforms, some wearing a skull-and-crossbones insignia on their helmets, stormed the Baghdad headquarters of the Journalistic Freedoms Observatory, a prominent Iraqi press freedom group. Among materials stolen: archives that documented abuses against the media.

A CPJ report released on February 25 told of military and security forces preventing cameras from entering Baghdad's Tahrir Square where thousands of protesters had gathered and of dozens of journalists being assaulted, arrested and their film confiscated. "We are particularly

disturbed that a democratically elected government such as that of Iraq would attempt to quash coverage of political protests," Robert Mahoney, CPJ's deputy director, said in the report.

On top of it all, more journalists were murdered. Veteran reporter Hilal al-Ahmadi, well known for his coverage of financial and administrative corruption, was gunned down outside his home in Mosul on February 17. Mohamed al-Hamdani, a reporter for al-Italiyah satellite TV, was killed in a suicide bombing in Ramadi on February 24 while covering a religious celebration. Two other journalists were wounded.

Iraq's journalists face stark realities:

- Police and Iraqi military have been particularly brutal to media.
- Draft press laws under debate could further squelch press freedom and give greater rise to self-censorship.
- An increase in sectarian violence could place journalists in greater danger from extremist militias, terror groups, and other elements who view the messenger as the enemy.

There are no easy solutions to the problems Iraq's journalists face, yet despite the atrocities committed against them, Iraq's press corps refuses to fade away. A cadre of feisty media practitioners remains steadfastly committed to the watchdog role and to press freedom in their conflict-plagued country of 31 million.

Iraq's News Media After Saddam: Liberation, Repression, and Future Prospects is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance. For more information on CIMA, please visit <http://cima.ned.org>.