

# **Journalists Are the Last to Know**

## **Problems with the Media in Post-Saddam Hussein Iraq**

**Jamal Ameadi**

**After the end of an authoritarian regime in any nation, media structures are bound to unravel into a state of near chaos. This is evidenced by haphazard management of journalistic work, non-adherence to the minimum standards of independence and responsibility in print media, an absence of transparency in regards to sources of funding, and a complete lack of professionalism, objectivity and editorial policies in organizing work within media establishments. In addition, a multitude of different journalistic concepts and theories that dictate media work, come to surface. These have severely harmed the Iraqi media, as has been the case in other nascent democracies still emerging from authoritarian rule. My own experience in working in the media over the past three years has motivated me to outline here the most pressing problems currently facing the Iraqi media.**

### **1. The political problem**

**Discussion of political problems in Iraq leads us to focus on three phenomena still ruling the country today. The first of these is that we have a local society, but not a civil society. The second phenomenon is that we have movements, but not parties, and the third is that we have a government, but not a state. With regard to the first, we need to be aware of the fact that civil society is the product of a centralized state and is structured around a number of state supporting institutions, even when these same institutions monitor or even criticize the state's performance. It is indeed the very aim of these institutions to pressure the state to develop into an idealized, polished sort of entity. Civil society is the direct result of a civil state, each complementing the other. Local society, on the other hand, in its adoption of non-civil values from pre-state society, is the antithesis of the civil state and is ruled by an entirely different set of relations (tribal and familial for example). It therefore impedes, through resistance, the development of the state into its ideal stage towards a greater centralization of authority. With the emergence of the state, however, civil bodies develop which no longer aim at hindering the centralization of government, but rather at functioning as watchdogs, halting the development of monopolizing of authority and guaranteeing an even distribution of power.**

**This leads us to the discussion of two other realities which are interconnected, as well as related to the first point. Most of the parties to form the government in post-Saddam Iraq have been more similar in nature to movements rather than parties, as they have been unable to break free from their affiliations with locally based movements and have failed to stand for a national identity. In other words, the parties and their agendas are products of religious groups (Christian or Sabaeen for example), ethnic groups (Kurdish for example), sectarian groups (Shi'ite or Sunni for example), or other groups solely concerned with their own interests. Most of these parties failed to offer a sense of Iraqi identity at a time when Iraqis were in need of a bonding force which could help draw them back into a unified national state after the fall of the "father" figurehead who had coercively often forced together a 'nation' ideal by repressing all smaller cultural identities. As a result, we have been left with movements as opposed to parties. Due to this, we find ourselves facing an authority or government, without the existence of a state consisting of national institutions. Our institutions have therefore remained partisan and are vulnerable to total dismantling in the event of a change of power. All of this has created rhetoric, aimed at those in power, accusing them of many-sided, confusing and often contradictory promises. It has been difficult for the media to filter the opposing rhetoric issued by government supporters and by the opposition. Media outlets have been faced with floods of conflicting statements and declarations, along with positions reflecting local identities, which has led to confusion and fragmentation within media institutions. Furthermore, media institutions have become biased, and partisan or sectarian media has now become prevalent in Iraq. There are Sunni, Shi'ite, and Kurdish media institutions, as well as others.**

## **2. The security problem**

**Today, I received a report issued by an Iraqi website called "Journalistic Freedoms Observatory" which, in coordination with other Iraqi and foreign NGO's, seeks to document attacks made on Iraqi journalists. The report was issued on the occasion of the "World Press Freedom Day" and document's 109 assassinations of journalists since the start of the military operation to topple Saddam Hussein's regime. The statistics reveal an alarming number of deaths, surpassing the number of journalists killed in any conflict in modern history.**

**Exacerbated by the foreign troops, Iraqi political parties, militias, armed groups and organized crime, the deteriorating security situation has had a noticeable effect on media staff. Iraqi media personnel are still**

vulnerable to the dangers of assassination, injury, kidnapping or imprisonment, and no serious steps have been taken to protect them. This has had a grave effect on people's freedom of speech and on the general freedom of the press in Iraq. The armed groups active in Iraq are ruled by short term strategies that are often unplanned and ever changing. Journalists have been selected as targets because they have, amongst other things, either objected to political agendas endorsed by these groups, or can be used add fuel to even more chaos. What journalists are experiencing is the result of a post-Saddam Iraqi authority or government's loss of control over security, and their inability to provide the protection needed by media personnel. In addition, the large number of Iraqi news outlets to have emerged since the fall of Saddam Hussein, has created a new barrier against any genuine desire to offer such protection. It has become possible for any person to establish their own media outlet, with any number of employees. This has created a media sector larger than that which is needed in Iraq today.

### **3. The economic problem**

There are also a number of financial matters affecting the media in Iraq. For example, the consequences of unemployment, poor salaries and working conditions as well as the various sources of funding affecting the media's autonomy and independence. The unemployment problem continues, despite certain measures being taken which have improved the situation somewhat. A directive issued by Paul Bremer has resulted in the eventual dismantling of the Ministry of Information and resulted in a loss of jobs for 6,800 media personnel. A large percentage of them have now been transferred to the Ministry of Culture while others were forced to retire. Journalists, especially those working in the private sector, suffer greatly from the absence of protective legislation, such as payment guarantees, medical and social benefits and other employee rights. Journalists are subject to job termination without prior warning at any time and are denied any rights in such cases. In terms of funding, there are many different sources with conflicting political, economic, intellectual, and cultural agendas. This has ranged from foreign funding, government funding, party funding, to funding by smaller, more specific local groups. Such an array of funding sources continuously threatens that precarious pretense of autonomy often held by media institutions in Iraq. The fact of the matter is that these institutions are not autonomous, at least not on the political and economic level.

#### **4. The legal problems**

**No matter what level of freedom media personnel might enjoy, they cannot function in a void, but need a framework of laws and regulations to enable them to work effectively. When this is not the case, freedom can lead to chaos. The Iraqi media has been suffering from severe legal problems, which have manifested in the following ways:**

**a. The absence of any legal framework for organizing media work in Iraq. The old laws governing publication and crime are still in effect, despite the fact that they contain passages which are in direct conflict with the constitution.**

**b. There is no Iraqi journalistic code of ethics. Attempts made to draft one such code did not receive the necessary attention, because it was believed that only a minority of people working in the Iraqi media were involved.**

**c. Information is still monopolized by the foreign troops and specialized government agencies. It remains difficult for Iraqi journalists to gain access to it. Iraqi journalists lack any legal framework specifying their right to have access to information and to use or broadcast it as they please.**

**d. The monopoly on information has led to a lessening of exposure, particularly on thornier issues away from the limelight, the adverse effect of which can be seen in the diminishing role played by the media in illuminating negative trends such as corruption.**

**e. The three registered unions for journalists in Iraq are suffering from severe internal and external division. There is no tangible movement towards coordination and no set of unified laws governing union practices. This is largely due to an inherited mutual distrust amongst the various leaderships which continue to dominate in modern Iraq.**

**Hopefully, the pending law concerning article thirty-six of the Iraqi constitution will address these problems, or at least some of them.**

#### **5. Problems faced by professionals**

**Despite the enormous number of Iraqi media personnel, the percentage of proficiently skilled professionals is alarmingly low. Projects designed for training and development are primitive, and there is no**

comprehensive plan to address this immediate need. This necessitates the establishment of an Iraqi media development center which must be funded by an independent source, guaranteeing autonomy and professionalism.

Current journalistic theories and concepts found in most Iraqi media outlets are still based on authoritarian, propagandist ideas, despite the fact that a good amount of institutions have declared their adoption of liberal concepts. Most Iraqi media personnel still operate as if they are "thinkers for the nation" with a monopoly on knowledge and the truth, giving them the right to direct public opinion. They do not offer the wider public any range of choice, denying readers and viewers of their right to choose. This kind of behavior might be justified in the early stages of state-building, but only if the liberal media institutions come up with a plan for a gradual shift toward more liberal concepts and theories in media work, thereby reflecting the actual development in the state-building process.

Finally, improvisation is the prevalent working strategy on management levels in most Iraqi media institutions because there are very few creative administrators running such institutions, hence there is a dire need for specialized training programs in that area.

### **Conclusion**

The problems facing Iraqi media institutions are multifaceted, but advancement on the political front seems to be essential for any improvement in the media landscape. A poor and improvisatory implementation of consensus democracy has subjected Iraqi society to the hegemony of religious, national, sectarian and tribal values. It has become an anti-state society. In order for consensus democracy to work - and this point has been overlooked in the implementation of the model in Iraq - the players in the political field must be organized into parties and not movements. The existence of movements in place of parties has led to the lack of two main features in Iraqi political life: political opposition and a check and balance capacity between the branches of the government. Consensus among the movements has resulted in a parliament based on consensus among the main political groups represented, producing a governing council and a cabinet consisting of members from those same agreeing parties.

These problems require serious thinking concerning the perception of the state on the part of the local society in Iraq, about studying the reasons for the existence of the "alternative state" among the local

society and about merging local cultures into a national culture as a means of eliminating the threats posed by these local communities to the state. Local society should be treated as an intellectual concept prevalent in Iraqi society, and not simply as another set of structures and forms to be addressed. This is how non-civil actors continue to be treated as civil actors, allowing them to form their own elected councils and run their own affairs, placing a burden on state building efforts. There are other examples, such as the adoption of a policy of appeasement toward religious, ethnic, sectarian and tribal groups, with administrative and political posts being promised to them, especially during party electoral campaigns. There is the reliance of politicians on their geographic, tribal, sectarian and religious affiliations during their election campaigns and in their media statements.

In this regard, the Iraqi democratic experiment remains a sham. It has formally created democratic institution, but these have remained devoid of content. This has had a negative effect on the fourth estate, represented by the press. The development of an effective media can only be successful within a healthy political atmosphere including a clear form of opposition and a properly functioning system of checks and balances.

#### **Iraqi Media Publishing and Broadcasting in Arabic:**

##### **A. Newspapers**

*Al-Basa'ir / Higher Council of Islamic Scholars*

*Dar al-Salam / Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)*

*Al-Hawza, Ishraqat al-Sadr / Sadrism Movement*

*Al-'Adala / Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIR)*

*Al-Bayan / Islamic Da'wa Party*

*Al-Bayyina / Hizbullah Movement in Iraq*

*Al-Ta'akhi / Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)*

*Al-Ittihad / Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)*

*Al-Sabah / Iraqi Media Network (IMN, government media)*

*Al-Mada / Independent*

*Al-Zaman / Independent*

*Al-Sabah al-Jadid / Independent*

*Al-Mashriq / Independent*

##### **B. Radio Stations**

*Radio Dar al-Salam / Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)*

*Radio Nawa / American funded, broadcast from Kurdistan*

*Radio Voice of Iraq / American funded, broadcast from Prague (Czech )*

*Baghdad Broadcasting / Iraqi Media Network (IMN, government media)*

*Most other radio stations are independent, such as Radio Dija, Radio Al-Nas, and Radio Al-Mahabba.*

**C. Satellite Stations**

**Al-Furat / Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)**

**Biladi / Islamic Da'wa Party**

**Al-Anwar / Shi'ite channel under authority of Marja'iyah Al-Shirazi**

**Baghdad / Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)**

**Al-Rafidain / Higher Council of Islamic Scholars**

**Kurdsat / Official Kurdish channel broadcasting in Arabic**

**Ashur / Chaldeo-Assyrian Movement**

**Al-Iraqiya / Iraqi Media Network (IMN, government media)**

**Al-Hurra Iraq / American funded, headquarter in Baghdad**

**Al-Sharqiya / Independent, headquarter in Dubai**

**Al-Fayha' / Independent, headquarter in Dubai**