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Mediated Hegemony: Interference in the post-Saddam Iraqi media sector

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Abstract:

The toppling of Saddam in 2003 brought with it the re-emergence of the free press in Iraq. This has seen Iraq shift from only a handful of state media outlets that served as propaganda machines, to a vast array of Iraqi-owned newspapers, radio stations and television channels which are being fervently produced and avidly consumed across the nation. As is to be expected, there are several problems that have accompanied such a divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile media landscape. Leaving aside important issues such as the dangers faced by Iraqi journalists and the lack of appropriate press laws, this paper focuses instead on the influence of both foreign and domestic political bodies on the post-Saddam Iraqi media sector. Among the foreign influences are Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, all of which fund, control and manipulate various Iraqi media outlets. Not surprisingly, the United States has been the most active, using both overt and clandestine propaganda methods as well as forced closure to control the Iraqi media sector. Unfortunately, such measures are not limited to those governments which exist outside Iraq's borders, with both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional authority having used similar means to control and even silence Iraq's nascent public sphere. This paper concludes by noting the irony of limiting press freedoms in Iraq during this crucial phase in its transition from despotism to democracy.

Introduction

With the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, Iraq's media environment was changed forever. Almost overnight it transformed from Saddam's tightly controlled propaganda machine to one of the freest media environments on earth (Zanger, 2005: 106). By the end of the month, the Iraqi Ministry of Information had been abolished and its 7,000 employees suddenly found themselves without regular income (Zanger, 2005: 107). These former state media pundits carried with them their years of experience communicating – albeit under tight controls – with the Iraqi people. In addition, Iraq also witnessed an influx of expatriates, refugees and newcomers, who brought an invaluable and divergent knowledge base gained from living in liberal democracies where they had no doubt witnessed first hand the function of the Fourth Estate. The evidence of their fervent labour and newfound freedom was soon to be seen on the streets of Baghdad where, by the end of May 2003, approximately 100 news publications and a handful of new broadcast outlets were available, while others were launched concurrently in Basra, Kirkuk and Mosul (Daragahi, 2003: 46). These numbers increased substantially throughout the year. By the middle of 2003, Iraq was home to more than 20 radio stations (RadioNetherland, 2003c), between 15 and 17 Iraqi-owned television stations, and approximately 200 Iraqi-owned and run newspapers across the entire country, with smaller regional towns such as Najaf boasting more than 30 newspapers in a city of only 300,000 people (Finer, 2005; Gerth, 2005; "The press in Iraq," 2005; Whitaker, 2003; Zanger, 2005: 107). Indeed, Iraqis were so keen for undoctored news that entire sections of Baghdad's sidewalk for example, were taken up by street vendors who laid the myriad publications out across the pavement, many of which were sold out by early afternoon (*A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media*, 2003: 7; Opiel Jnr, 2003). Similarly, the citizens of Iraq flocked to local retailers who had managed to import scores of Satellite dishes and despite costing around USD200 (more than the average annual salary of Iraq at the time), Iraqis were keen to tune in to more than 300 regional satellite channels and the growing number of indigenous satellite stations (Cochrane, 2006; *A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media*, 2003: 7; Opiel Jnr, 2003; Matthew Price, 2003).

Given that the United States had long supported clandestine opposition media in Iraq, not to mention its extensive Psychological Operations ("Psy-Ops") campaign, it is of little surprise that they launched a number of Iraq-aimed radio stations in the lead up to and during the initial phases of the Iraq War in 2003. The day after the fall of Baghdad, the coalition forces began broadcasting their own television station, *Nahwa Al-Hurrieh* ("Towards Freedom"), from onboard a purpose built Command Solo plane (Feuilherade, 2003a; RadioNetherland, 2003b; Rutherford, 2004: 60), launched by personal messages from both US President George W. Bush and (former) British Prime Minister Tony Blair ("Towards Freedom TV: A Channel Targeting the Iraqis, launched by Messages from Blair and Bush," 2003). With the arrival of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) on 21 April, came the resurrection of Saddam's Ministry of Information which was renamed the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) (Rugh, 2004: 116) and was directly responsible for a plethora of new Iraqi media outlets. Most of these media outlets were then handed over to the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) with its ascension to power on 28 June 2004. Although such media are currently somewhat co-opted by the incumbent Shi'a and Kurdish political groups, the removal of US

control saw them gain in both credibility and popularity among ordinary Iraqis to the point where the state-run media now represent some of the most widely consumed and well respected media in the country (Al-Deen, 2005; Al-Marashi, 2007: 106; Cochrane, 2006; Finer, 2005; Metcalf, 2006; RadioNetherland, 2005)

However, most of Iraq's television stations, radio stations and newspapers were not started by the CPA, the British or the Iraqi government but by the seemingly countless political parties, religious factions and/or ethnic groups of post-Saddam Iraq, each of which is jostling for support and legitimacy in the nation's struggle from despotism to democracy (Cochrane, 2006; Ghazi, 2006; "The press in Iraq," 2007). Here, the domestic politics of Iraq are convoluted by the vast number of religious and ethnic divides that do not neatly dissect the nation into a series of mutually exclusive groups. There are, as is now commonly known, three large ethno-religious groups in Iraq, the Shi'a Arabs, the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs as well as a number of smaller "...racial and religious minorities... [including] Turkomans, Persians, Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Jews, Yazidihs, Sabeans, and others" (Batatu, 1982 [1978]: 13). Within each of these broad categories are more intricate differences, with each sector capable of being further broken down by religious sects, varying ethnicities and cultural groups as well as political sub-categories. Given the long and complex political history of each of these groups, it is not at all surprising that the freeing up of the Iraqi media sector following the coalition invasion witnessed the arrival of a highly partisan media, geared towards the stated policies and agendas of Iraq's divergent ethno-religious and political scene (Harmston, 2003). As Ibrahim Al-Marashi points out, the Iraqi media sector has witnessed the rise of various ethno-sectarian "...media empires" which have evolved into "...quite a pervasive element in Iraq's Fourth Estate" (Al-Marashi, 2007: 104). In this way, Iraq's media sector can be seen to speak for all manner of religious, ethnic and political factions, covering the diverse and nuanced interests of this complex nation. As is to be expected, there are enormous variations in quality and life-span between them, ranging from the highly sophisticated and professional outlets to the short-lived hackneyed efforts of clearly biased individuals pandering to a sympathetic few.

However, despite Iraq's divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile media landscape, there have only been a handful of scholarly studies which have attempted to document and analyse the role that such media has played in the complex matrix of post-Saddam politics (Abedin, 2006; Al-Deen, 2005; Al-Marashi, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Barker, 2008; Cochrane, 2006; Isakhan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Here Paul Cochrane argues in an issue of *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* that such developments represent what he calls the

"Lebanonization" of the Iraqi media in reference to the myriad ethno-sectarian media outlets that co-exist in Lebanon's complex media and political sphere (Cochrane, 2006). However, perhaps more disconcerting is the fact that a series of recent policy papers and newspaper reports have begun to argue that Iraq's complex and highly partisan media landscape may actually serve to enhance the ethno-sectarian lines which gauchely divide Iraqi society (Abedin, 2006; Al-Marashi, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Ghazi, 2006; Metcalf, 2006; Roug, 2006). This has been countered in earlier work by the author which illustrate the role that the Iraqi press has played in fostering a renewed public sphere in Iraq, particularly during the series of elections and referendums held across the nation in 2005 (Isakhan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). While further studies have limited their criticism to the funding of various Iraqi organs by

US organisations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (Barker, 2008), this paper hopes to contribute to this growing body of literature by focusing on the covert and overt practices utilised by various foreign (US, Saudi Arabia and Iran) and domestic (the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional authority) powers over the media landscape of post-Saddam Iraq.

Interference in Iraq's Media Sector

As is to be expected, there are several problems that have accompanied such a divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile media landscape. First and foremost, the Iraqi media industry operated outside of an appropriate legal framework from the fall of Saddam in April 2003 until the establishment of the Communication and Media Commission (CMC) in March 2004 (Hama-Saeed, 2007; Piper, 2004). Although this period did see Lewis Paul Bremer III (the leader of the US-controlled CPA) issue "Order Number 14: Prohibited Media Activity", this document was not designed to provide a framework, but rather to render illegal any organ which "...incites violence...incites civil disorder...incites violence against Coalition Forces or CPA personnel...advocates alterations to Iraq's borders" or "...advocates the return of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party" (Bremmer, 2003: 1-2). The penalties for breaking such prohibitions were severe, including detainment, arrest and prosecution with the sentence of up to one year in prison, while in "emergencies" the Coalition Forces were permitted to "...take direct action to prevent or defeat the threat" (Bremmer, 2003: 2). Perhaps one of the first signs of the willingness of the emerging press sector in Iraq to criticise the elite was to be found in the media's reaction to Bremer's "Order Number 14". To cite just one example Ashtar Ali Yasseri, the editor of the successfully re-launched Iraqi political satire magazine *Habezbooz* (a term from Iraqi folklore, last published in 1932), reacted to "Order Number 14" by stating, "How can they say we have a democracy? That's not democracy. It sounds like the same old thing" (Yasseri as cited in: Hama-Saeed, 2007) (see also: Daragahi, 2003: 50; Matthew Price, 2003).

Finally in March 2004, Bremer signed "Order Number 65: Iraqi Communications and Media Commission" (Bremer, 2004; Hama-Saeed, 2007; Piper, 2004) which was designed to "...develop, strengthen and maintain [the] professional working practices that support the media's role as a public watchdog" (Bremer, 2004: 3). The Order also outlined a number of lofty but admirable goals for the post-Saddam Iraqi media including its role in the development of a "...functioning civil society by providing quality public education, current affairs and entertainment programming" along with the expectations that it would "...encourage pluralism and diverse political debate and must empower rather than restrain independent and impartial commentary" (Bremer, 2004: 2). To achieve this, the CMC was endowed with an annual budget of USD6 million and given the authority to regulate the Iraqi communications industry, including Iraq's growing number of television and radio stations as well as the internet and telecommunications industries (Al-Deen, 2005; Al-Marashi, 2007: 131; Al-Qazwini, 2004; Feuilherade, 2004; Piper, 2004). At the time of the inauguration of the CMC, the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) agreed that the CMC should not imitate the former Information Ministry and thereby serve as an independent body separate from present or future Iraqi governments (Piper, 2004). With the creation of the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) in mid-2004, the newly appointed Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi (the leader of the INA), oversaw the creation

of a second body, the Higher Media Commission (HMC) (Al-Qazwini, 2004; Monroe Price, 2004). This body appears more repressive than the CMC, allegedly threatening to "...license newspapers, impose requirements for publication that few existing news organizations can meet and punish unsubstantiated criticism of the government" (Monroe Price, 2004).

More recently, the Iraqi Constitution which was finalised by the Iraqi National Assembly (INA) in August 2005 and ratified by the people of Iraq in October of that same year – guarantees "Freedom of press, printing, advertisement, media and publication" but only so long as it does not "...violate public order and morality" ("The Iraqi Constitution," 2005). The problem here, as Kathleen Ridolfo has pointed out, is that this rather vague rhetoric leaves the Iraqi media vulnerable to the government's interpretation of such violations (Ridolfo, 2006). Indeed, the Iraqi media industry has continued to suffer since the establishment of the Iraqi Government in 2006 (see below).

The issue of the legal framework for Iraq's emerging media sector aside, employment as a journalist is still an extremely dangerous profession in Iraq as coalition forces, foreign insurgents and sectarian strife continue to ravage the country. Indeed, in 2005 the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) listed Iraq as the most dangerous country in the world for journalists (as cited in: Hama-Saeed, 2007). More recently, the Iraqi Journalists Association (IJA), the Arab Press Freedom Watch (APFW) and the Paris-based *Reporters Sans Frontieres* ("Reporters Without Borders" or RWB) have called on the newly appointed government in Baghdad to take greater security measures in the protection of journalists (as cited in: "Iraq: Local journalists call for increased protection," 2006; Usher, 2006). As part of their request, the IJA cited that 112 Iraqi journalists and media workers had been killed since March 2003¹ (as cited in: "Iraq: Local journalists call for increased protection," 2006). As can be imagined, tragic stories accompany each of these casualties and while it is outside the scope of this project to detail each of these, it is worth remembering the extreme risk taken by Iraqi journalists ever day.

In addition to these problems are reports that the quality and professionalism of the Iraqi media is highly dubious. As Maggy Zanger has pointed out, "...nearly all [Iraqi] papers trade in street rumour, conspiracy theories, and endless editorial comment, often based not on fact but bias, misconceptions and wild innuendo" (Zanger, 2005: 107). These papers have also been criticised for the quality of their written Arabic which is said to be below professional standard, while the articles themselves often fail to meet the basic journalistic criteria of objectivity and accuracy (Al-Qazwini, 2004; Piper, 2004; Whitaker, 2003). For example, in the immediate media explosion that followed the fall of Saddam in 2003, several rather bizarre articles appeared in the Iraqi press including stories that US troops had distributed pornography to school girls and wore X-ray sunglasses that enabled them to see through women's clothing,

¹ *As with the overall death toll of the current Iraq War, the number of Iraqi journalists who have been killed since 2003 increases every day and therefore reliable and up-to-date figures are difficult to assert. For a recent and chilling account of civilian casualties in Iraq since 2003 and the efforts taken to control and censor their publicity, see Richard Hil and Paul Wilson's Dead Bodies Don't Count: Civilian Casualties and the Forgotten Costs of the Iraq Conflict (Hil & Wilson, 2007).*

others documented the alleged influx of AIDS-infected Jewish prostitutes, and, more seriously, one incorrect report claimed that US troops had raped two Iraqi women (Fisk, 2003; Gourevitch, 2003: 36; Opiel Jnr, 2003; Matthew Price, 2003). However, while quality problems are an issue in the media of post-Saddam Iraq, it remains a significant improvement on the handful of pro-Ba'athist organs officially available under Saddam's regime, not to mention the fact that, by regional standards, Iraq's media landscape is of a particularly high level of quality, professionalism and diversity (Beehner, 2006; Von Zielbauer, 2006).

Beyond the impact that these problems and dangers continue to have on the day-to-day lives of the citizens of Iraq and their media sector is the influence of foreign powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Each of these has its own vested interest in the evolving politics of Iraq, largely due to the country's vast reservoirs of oil but also because of its geographical location and the myriad of religious and ethnic sects that are vying for power. This has meant that some of Iraq's recent media developments have been overtly or covertly supported by these foreign powers and thereby serve as their mouthpiece in the complexity that is post-Saddam Iraq.

One such example is Iran, which has long played a role in supporting Iraq's Shi'ite opposition movements, particularly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Republic of Iraq (SCIRI) which ran its affairs from the safety of Iran during the Ba'athist regime. Although it is not immediately clear what role the Iranian government is playing in supporting the SCIRI and their various partisan media outlets, it can be assumed that at the very least the SCIRI media remains sympathetic to the Iranian government. What is known for sure is that there remain several Iran-based media outlets that are specifically designed for the Iraqi audience and are easily received across the border. These include over 30 Iranian-backed radio stations and several satellite TV stations with at least some content in Arabic and designed for an Iraqi audience (Al-Deen, 2005; Al-Marashi, 2007: 139; "Broadcasting in Iraq," 2003; Grace, 2003; RadioNetherland, 2005; "Voice of the Mujahedin,"). Foremost amongst the latter is the popular 24-hour TV station *Al-Alam* ("The World") which has been dubbed Tehran's *Al-Jazeera* due to its slick production values and its clear distaste for the US-led occupation of Iraq (RadioNetherland, 2003c). Beginning before the onset of the war in February 2003, and currently available across the Middle East and in Europe, *Al-Alam* chose to hire a number of Iraqi news anchors and journalists which, along with the fact that it can be received in Iraq without a satellite dish, saw the station rapidly achieve some of the nation's highest ratings especially in the Shi'a south (Al-Qazwini, 2004; Cochrane, 2006; Feuilherade, 2004; Harmston, 2003; RadioNetherland, 2005). However, *Al-Alam* has also come under some criticism for its anti-US bias which is seen as "...clearly designed to incite violence" (RadioNetherland, 2003c).

More discreetly, the Saudi Arabian government has invested many oil-dollars in the various pan-Arab organs. For example, Saudi money has long supported the London-based pan-Arab daily, *Asharq Al-Awsat* ("The Middle East") and helped to set up the paper's Baghdad edition after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime ("The press in Iraq," 2005). In addition, a handful of Iraq's "independent media" has also received at least some funding from Saudi financiers. For example *Al-Diyar* ("The Homeland"), a terrestrial TV station launched in 2004, is currently run by Faisal Al-Yasiri, the

former head of Iraqi Radio and Television under the Ba'athist regime, who has received financial support from the Saudi-owned pan-Arab pay-TV provider Arab Radio and Television Network (ART) (Al-Marashi, 2007: 118; RadioNetherland, 2005). In addition Saad Bazzaz's multi-million dollar media franchise (comprising of the enormously popular and professional *Azzaman* ["The Times"] newspaper and *Al-Sharqiya* ["The Eastern One"] TV station) is allegedly being bank-rolled by the Saudi government. Indeed, in 2005 Bazzaz was accused of "...running a sophisticated covert propaganda operation funded by the Saudi Arabian intelligence" ("Iraqi Independent Media Mogul Accused of Running Saudi-funded covert Propaganda Operation," 2005) (see also: Barker, 2008: 121-122; Pallister, 2005). In addition, Bazzaz has also been accused of running a pro-Sunni media organisation which actively discriminates against Shi'ites as well as using his enormous influence and wealth to bolster his own political ambitions (Al-Marashi, 2007: 118-119; Cochrane, 2006; Daragahi, 2003: 48; Metcalf, 2006; *A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media*, 2003: 8). However, despite this direct funding and allegations of clandestine operations, *Al-Diyar*, *Azzaman* and *Al-Sharqiya* are widely considered some of Iraq's more independent media outlets and appear relatively free of political allegiances. It therefore remains unclear to what extent the Saudi involvement in Iraq's post-2003 media landscape has included editorial interference or political biases.

However, the efforts of the Iranians and the Saudis pale in comparison to those of the United States. In fact, shortly after the fall of Baghdad in 2003, the Bush administration poured millions into the development of the Iraqi media (Barker, 2008; Gerth, 2005). While this money certainly helped in developing media outlets that range from explicitly pro-US to non-partisan (such as the Iraqi National Congress' [INC] *Al-Mutamar* ["The Congress"] and the independent Kurdish paper *Bilattijah* ["Without Direction" or "Without Bias"], respectively) it was also used to enable CPA hegemony over the fledgling Iraqi media. Indeed, with the signing by Bremmer of the rather vague conditions of "Order Number 14: Prohibited Media Activity" (Bremmer, 2003) on the 10 June 2003 (see earlier), the CPA effectively garnered complete control over the media of post-Saddam Iraq. This began with a crackdown on the CPA's own IMN which was ordered to cease all man-on-the-street interviews as they had proven, rather unsurprisingly, to be far too critical of the occupational forces. The IMN was further ordered to stop airing religious material such as readings from the Koran and to instead screen programs detailing the recently issued Occupying Authority Law (Gourevitch, 2003: 34-35). In addition, the former editor of the IMN-run *Al-Sabah* ("The Morning") newspaper has accused the CPA of direct editorial interference after he quit the organ in May 2004 to start his own independent paper, *Al-Sabah Al-Jadid* ("The New Morning") ("The press in Iraq," 2005; "The press in Iraq," 2007). More broadly, the IMN came under almost immediate scrutiny with the publication of an independent Iraqi Media report carried out by the combined efforts of the Baltic Media Centre, Index on Censorship, Institute for War and Peace Reporting and the International Media Support (*A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media*, 2003). This report uncovered a host of problems at the IMN including the hiring of inexperienced staff, a failure to pay the staff properly, the condition of the equipment being used, the lack of appropriate training, the poor quality and unprofessional nature of the actual news being presented and, of course, the inherent bias towards the CPA. The weight of this

final issue was made clear by the report's recommendation that, due to its ties to the CPA, the IMN should be

...dismantled and the constituent parts all located within independent institutions. A clear policy for handing over its TV and radio to an independent broadcaster, outside direct control of any new ministry, should be confirmed. Newspapers should be given formal independence and senior staff removed from the payroll of government contractors. (*A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media*, 2003: 3)

Despite such recommendations, the IMN continued and the CPA sought to expand its Iraq-based media empire by attempting to bring various "independent" Iraqi media outlets under its control (Gourevitch, 2003: 35; RadioNetherland, 2003c). Indeed, even before the issue of "Order Number 14", Maj. Gen. David H. Patraeus² considered putting an army officer and a translator inside the independent *Mosul TV* in order to censor what he perceived to be the broadcasting of content which might inflame ethno-sectarian passions (Pincus, 2003; RadioNetherland, 2003a). Although *Mosul TV* was commandeered by the US forces and re-launched shortly after the fall of Baghdad, by July of the same year, the CPA was actively attempting to take control of *Mosul TV* in order to fold the station under the control of the IMN ("Broadcasting in Iraq," 2003; RadioNetherland, 2005; Sennitt, 2003). Similarly, *Najaf TV*, a Shi'a channel airing Islamic lectures, was initially ordered to surrender itself to the control of US forces (*A New Voice in the Middle East: A Provisional Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Media*, 2003: 9). Bravely, the stations manager, Ali Khasif Al-Ghitta, refused claiming, "We are an independent station. The CPA can't tell us what to say. They want us to tell everyone how good the governor they have appointed is when he is a crook and a Ba'athist" (Al-Ghitta, as cited in: Kafala, 2003).

Sadly, these attempts to co-opt Iraqi media outlets were not the end of the CPA's interference with the burgeoning press of post-Saddam Iraq. In July 2003, the Shi'a independent newspaper *Al-Mustaqilla* ("The Independent") was shut down by the CPA and the managing editor, Dhari Al-Duleimi, was arrested. The paper was accused of having run headlines such as "Death to all spies and those who cooperate with the US; killing them is a religious duty" (Gourevitch, 2003: 36) and for thereby inciting violence (Matthew Price, 2003). However, Duleimi has defended *Al-Mustaqilla* by claiming that it simply quoted a particular religious clergyman and mirrored a common sentiment in occupied Iraq. Reflecting on the closure of the paper he stated "If this is American or world democracy we reject it. Democracy means dialogue and exchange of views. Not attacking it in this way" (as cited in: Brahimi, 2003). This was followed in March 2004 by the closure of two organs produced by the influential Shi'a cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr's Sadr Trend, *Al-Hawza*³ (the name of a particular Shi'a seminary in Najaf where a number of leading clerics teach) and the

² At the time Patraeus was in charge of various public works operations in Mosul and today, the promoted General Patraeus, holds the most senior position in Iraq as the commander of the US-led Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I).

³ It should be noted here that Al-Hawza appears to have re-opened since 2004, currently published under the defiant moniker Al-Hawza Al-Natiqa ("The Active Hawza") (Al-Marashi, 2007: 139).

quarterly journal *Al-Mada* (“The View”), both of which appear to have represented Al-Sadr’s political and theological ideology, advocating an Islamic republic for Iraq and featuring vitriolic critiques of Israel and the American-led occupation (Rosen, 2004). Specifically, *Al-Hawza* was targeted for featuring articles with headlines such as “America Hates Islam and Muslims” and its closure prompted thousands of protestors to gather at the paper’s offices in central Baghdad (Al-Sheikh, 2004; Gettleman, 2004; Rosen, 2004). Despite being relatively peaceful at the time, the protestors chanted slogans such as “No, no, America!” and “Where is democracy now?”, also vowing to avenge *Al-Hawza*’s closure (Al-Sheikh, 2004; Gettleman, 2004). In a twist of irony, it was the closure of *Al-Hawza*, rather than anything printed across its humble pages, which ultimately garnered Al-Sadr renewed reverence amongst his already loyal followers and arguably incited his Mahdi Army to violence (Al-Marashi, 2007: 132; Rosen, 2004). In addition, the closure of *Al-Hawza* also lost the CPA the prestige associated with their promise of a free press in post-Saddam Iraq. Indeed, Iraqi journalists such as Kamal Abdul Karim of *Azzaman* (Gettleman, 2004) and Basim al-Sheikh of *Al-Dustour* (“The Constitution”) were quick to react to the CPA’s actions, with the latter opining that

...we must conclude that there is someone lurking to see what is written in the newspapers. We thought that the censor had gone forever. But it seems he is still here, suspiciously inspecting every newspaper—despite all the new freedoms we supposedly now enjoy... Regardless of the reasons behind the closure of *Al-Hawza*, we are absolutely against the closure of newspapers no matter what justifications are given, especially considering that we lack laws governing mass communications. If this continues, chaos will lead to confusion. (Al-Sheikh, 2004)

Other US involvement in Iraq’s fledgling media environment has been more sinister and clandestine. It has long been known that the United States conducted its extensive Psychological Operations (“PsyOps”) campaign in Iraq throughout the 1990s under the Clinton administration (Myers, 1999; Sussman, 2005) and that it was extended well in advance of the Coalition invasion of 2003 (Clark & Christie, 2005; Rutherford, 2004: 55-60; Taylor, 2003). However, it has only recently come to light that this same operation has since been responsible for covertly planting pro-US news stories in the Iraqi press. In mid 2004 a company by the name of the Lincoln Group formed a partnership with the Rendon Group (which had earlier been hired by Washington to help counter Taliban propaganda in the Afghanistan War) (Gerth, 2005). Together they were awarded a USD100 million contract by the Pentagon to continue “strategic communications” in Iraq (Mazzetti & Daragahi, 2005; “U.S. war propaganda carries on,” 2006). Part of this operation entailed covertly running more than 1000 news articles in 12 to 15 of Iraq’s newspapers at a cost of between USD40 and USD2000 per item (Gerth, 2005). Mostly, these stories were written by US soldiers who were part of the “Information Operations” program and then translated into Arabic by the Lincoln Group’s Iraqi staff (Hama-Saeed, 2007). These Iraqis then posed as wealthy freelancers, offering the shoestring Iraqi press money in exchange for publication (Mazzetti & Daragahi, 2005; “U.S. war propaganda carries on,” 2006). It was never disclosed to the papers that these articles which were typically written from an Iraqi perspective and purposefully designed to cater to specific ethnic or religious groups (such as Shi’ites or Kurds) and to address key issues (including

terrorism or democracy) were actually the cleverly disguised propaganda of the occupying force. Although generally pro-American papers such as the INC's *Al-Mutamar* did not seem too concerned about their publication of these articles others, such as the editors of the independent and well respected *Al-Dustour* and *Al-Mada* ("The View", independent; not to be confused with the Sadr-backed journal of the same name) have claimed that they had no idea the stories were written by US operatives and have understandably expressed their outrage (Mazzetti & Daragahi, 2005). More to the point, an editorial in *Azzaman* deemed such actions a blatant attempt "...to humiliate the independent national press" of Iraq (as cited in: Gerth, 2005). The White House initially expressed its concerns over such allegations ("Bush concern at Iraq 'propaganda'," 2005) and while the American public was reassured that US law forbids such operations within the American domestic media (Mazzetti & Daragahi, 2005) an internal review by the Pentagon found that no guidelines were being violated by such Psy-Ops being conducted on Iraqi soil (Cochrane, 2006; Mazzetti, 2006). Subsequently, the United States government expressed that it intended to continue such propaganda campaigns and that such practices may well be extended to other parts of the world (Mazzetti, 2006).

Unfortunately, the interference in Iraq's media sector is not limited to those governments which exist outside its borders. Following the appointment of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in July 2003 by the CPA, the new interim body demonstrated its rather draconian approach to media freedom almost immediately by repeatedly suspending two of the region's most popular pan-Arab satellite channels, *Al-Arabiya* and *Al-Jazeera* for allegedly inciting violence (Feuilherade, 2003b; Fisk, 2003; "Iraq: Closure of Al-Arabiya News Channel," 2003; "Iraqi leaders ban Arab TV network," 2003; RadioNetherland, 2003d). Similarly, when the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) replaced the IGC in June 2004, the newly appointed Prime Minister Iyad Allawi made his approach to media freedom explicit by stating, "...we will not allow some people to hide behind the slogan of freedom of the press and media" (as cited in: Polk, 2005: 195). This was by no means an empty threat, as the IIG soon followed the example of the IGC before them by suspending both *Al-Arabiya* and *Al-Jazeera* under similar allegations of inciting violence (Al-Marashi, 2007: 131; Cochrane, 2006; Hama-Saeed, 2007; "IFJ Accuses Iraq of "Unacceptable and Illogical Censorship" Over Ban on Al-Jazeera," 2004; "Iraq Shuts Al-Jazeera Baghdad Office for a Month," 2004). Then in November 2004, the Allawi-created HMC went as far as to warn the Iraqi media industry to cover the unfolding events of the US military's operation to recapture Fallujah, *Operation Al-Fajr* ("Phantom Fury") in ways that reflected the official government stance or face unspecified consequences (RadioNetherland, 2005). This was followed in 2005 by the sentencing to prison of two Iraqi journalists from southern Baghdad after they dared to be critical of their provincial government and local police forces (Finer, 2005).

With the ascension of the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) following the January 2005 elections, came their drafting and ratification of the Iraqi Constitution (see earlier). However, despite the press freedoms that the constitution guarantees, the Iraqi media industry has continued to suffer since its promulgation. Indeed, 2006 has seen incidents such as the bashing and harassment of journalists working for the CPA-funded *Al-Hurra Iraq* ("The Free One") television network by the Iraqi police ("APFW Denounces the Aggression on Al-Hurra Reported by Iraqi Police," 2006), while countless others have been threatened, beaten, arrested, detained and even

charged with defamation ("APFW Calls for the Release of Iraqi Journalist," 2006; Enders, 2006; Finer, 2005; Hama-Saeed, 2007; Ridolfo, 2006; Von Zielbauer, 2006). More recently, the Iraqi Parliament has urged Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki to close down Saad Bazzaz's "independent" media empire, including both the *Azzaman* newspaper and the *Al-Sharqiya* TV station, under allegations that they were too critical of a recent draft law that proposed turning Iraq into a federal state ("Parliament asks government to close Azzaman," 2006). While such threats and intimidation have led some papers to close in protest ("APFW Expresses Solidarity with Iraqi Editor in Chief," 2006; "Iraq: Al Shahid al Mustaqel Stops publishing in Response to Governmental Practices," 2006) others, such as the satellite TV channel *Al-Zawra* ("The Curved [City]" – a popular soubriquet for Baghdad) have been ordered closed by the Iraqi Government (Al-Marashi, 2007: 114; Hama-Saeed, 2007).

Sadly, the controlling bodies of the relatively autonomous Kurdish region in the north of Iraq have also enacted similar restrictions upon its once relatively free press. In fact, almost immediately after the fall of Saddam in 2003, several journalists were either threatened or arrested, including three journalists who were incarcerated by the powerful Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) for having questioned the party's finances (Hama-Saeed, 2007). In 2005 the Kurdish authorities successfully sued Kurdistan's most widely read and well respected independent newspaper, *Hawlati* ("Citizen"), effectively imprisoning both a former and the current editor of the paper for 6 months after they criticised a Kurdish official for not paying his phone bill (Hama-Saeed, 2007; Von Zielbauer, 2006). In late 2005 a Kurdish-Austrian was initially sentenced to 30 years in prison after he had posted several articles on the internet which accused the head of the KDP, Massoud Barzani, of abusing his position ("APFW Alert: APFW Condemns the Verdict Against Kamal Sayed Qader," 2006; Hama-Saeed, 2007). However, with mounting diplomatic pressure from the Austrian government and other international bodies, the sentence was eventually "watered down" to a year and a half ("APFW Alert: APFW Condemns the Verdict Against Kamal Sayed Qader," 2006).

Unfortunately, the freedom accorded to the Kurdish press has continued to deteriorate, with 2006 witnessing the harassment, detention and beating of dozens of journalists across Iraqi Kurdistan. For example in both March and August 2006 a series of relatively peaceful demonstrations broke out in protest against the regional government and the lack of basic public services. In both cases, the journalists covering the events became the target of the Kurdish security forces, with the August protests resulting in the arrest of 28 journalists and the confiscation of their cameras and other equipment (Hama-Saeed, 2007; Ridolfo, 2006). In addition, 2006 also saw the Kurdish authorities escalate their attacks against *Hawlati*, including the detention of several more of the paper's journalists, one of which had been investigating a warehouse fire that witnesses claim was deliberately lit by a Kurdish official desperate to destroy any evidence of his black market operations (Axe, 2006). As recently as September 2007 both the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have demonstrated their distaste for an independent media by agreeing to withdraw any further interaction with those media outlets which have proven themselves to be critical of their leadership. Taking this a step further, the PUK has begun to reprimand and even sack a number of their senior officials who were found to have made unfavourable remarks about the party and its leadership in their media appearances (Mahwi & Abdullah, 2007).

Conclusion

The irony here barely needs to be stated. At a time when Iraq is struggling to build a stable and robust democratic order following years of repression under the Ba'athist regime, there are a whole collection of forces working to undermine one of the pillars of Iraq's emerging democracy, its free press. While the efforts of the Iranians and Saudi's are clearly problematic and in need of further scrutiny, it is the US administrations contradictory rhetoric and action which invite the greatest amount of criticism. On the one hand the Bush administration has been adamant that the proliferation of democracy around the globe, and particularly across the Middle East, is central to its broader geo-political agenda⁴. Yet, at the same time, there is an undermining of one of the hallmarks of Iraq's emergent democracy – its free and independent press by both the development of state media services such as the IMN that openly serve US purposes, and by the destabilization or removal of those media organs which do not via more clandestine methods. Unfortunately, recent events indicate that this trend has continued since the ascension of the Iraqi government who have also sought to limit media freedom in Iraq and to silence the kind of reportage that one would generally hope to find in a free and democratic state. Similarly, the Kurdish regional authority has been active in repressing the nascent public sphere of Iraq via various practices that limit the functioning of the media.

Despite each of the above problems and controversies, there are several reasons to be optimistic about the media of post-Saddam Iraq. Perhaps the first such reason is the fact that thirty-five years of Ba'athist rule and its tight restrictions on the media has left in its wake an Iraqi population that has developed an "...abysmal distrust of official news" (Bengio, 2004: 109) and is skilled in navigating carefully crafted propaganda (Ali & Marzook, 2005; Bengio, 1998: 63; Braude, 2003: 141-142; King, 2003; Oppel Jnr, 2003). This can be seen in the fact that most Iraqis have exercised their right to eschew the United States backed media in favour of the local, independent press and the pan-Arab satellite channels. As Nicholas Mirzoeff notes, the people of Iraq have "...steadfastly refused to watch Iraqi Media Network, the US official television station, seeing it as simply more propaganda" (Mirzoeff, 2005: 76) (see also: Feuilherade, 2004; King, 2003). Beyond this, even former employees of the Lincoln Group have noted that the broader Psy-Ops program, despite its enormous cost, was largely ineffective due to the fact that Iraqis knew the content was American (Gerth, 2005; "U.S. war propaganda carries on," 2006). Even the uncovering of the Lincoln Group's association with the Pentagon and their collective strategy of planting pro-US news items in the independent Iraqi press was "...met mostly with shrugs in Baghdad, where readers tend to be sceptical about the media" (Gerth, 2005).

Beyond the fact that Iraqi audiences are generally critical of the media and able to navigate politically inspired propaganda, it is also worth noting that despite the forces attempting to control and manipulate the domestic media sector, it played a decidedly positive role during the elections and referendums held across the nation in 2005. Despite the various overt and clandestine measures taken to limit and control press freedom in Iraq, it nonetheless played a public service role in informing the people about where and when to vote, it monitored instances of corruption, it aired lengthy discussions on the pros and cons of constitutional government and democratic

⁴ See for example President Bush's 2005 State of the Union Address (Bush, 2005).

practises, and it delivered detailed information about the key parties and policies (Isakhan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). However, if these positive trends are to continue and Iraq is to build towards a truly robust and egalitarian democratic order, then the nation's media sector needs to be free from domestic restrictions and foreign interference. Both the foreign and domestic powers that have thus far interfered in Iraq's media sector need to stand aside and allow the rational-critical debate that facilitates this process.

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