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Invited Article:

In Defense of the Iraqi Media – Between Fueling Conflict and Healthy Pluralism

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Abstract: Despite the occupation and ensuing war, Iraq has experienced the emergence of a truly pluralistic media landscape after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003. Today, media coverage of domestic affairs is characterized not only by pluralism but also by bias and partiality reflecting strong ties between political actors and media outlets. Accordingly, the Iraqi media are often accused of fueling conflict and deepening the ethno-sectarian divide in society. Based on a qualitative frame analysis of Iraqi news bulletins, this study reveals that Iraqi media outlets provide indeed contesting frames on even the most divisive issues. Only the coverage of the armed war against IS is characterized by a non-pluralistic conformity among Iraqi channels that unequivocally focus on military successes against IS and jointly refrain from any criticism against the varied forces fighting IS in Iraq.

Keywords: Iraq, Iraqi Media, PMU, Islamic State, Haider al-Abadi, pluralism, incitement

Introduction

The ethno-sectarian divisions in Iraq today pose an existential threat on the beleaguered state. The potential secession of Kurdistan, the establishment of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the Sunni-Shiite divide has left the nation teetering on the brink. The media development in Iraq naturally reflects these cleavages. Generally, one can argue that the Iraqi media system is characterized by external pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: p. 27), where diversity is expressed at the level of the system, rather than within each outlet. As in other fragile states struggling with societal fragmentation and a high potential for armed conflict, partiality of media has become the very nature and defining feature of the media landscape in Iraq. Media are widely used as mouthpieces by conflict parties and political interest groups and are hence suspected of inciting sectarian hatred and exacerbating divisions (al-Marashi 2007; Price, al-Marashi & Stremlau 2010; Awad & Eaton 2013; Isakhan 2009).

The study at hand¹ analyzes the nature of discourse on domestic conflicts in Iraqi TV channels with an emphasis on actors and frames. The aim was to understand if Iraqi media channels offer a variety of views on contested issues and how they differ in the coverage of these issues. Furthermore, we also wanted to probe which groups were excluded in the mainstream media and if propagandistic and inciteful speech is part of the public discourse in Iraq. Probing these questions allowed us to draw conclusions about the current character of Iraqi pluralism.

The study reveals that, to a certain extent, Iraqi TV channels provide contesting frames on even the most divisive of issues. Furthermore, and despite the security, political and financial challenges, which have helped strengthen the links between political actors and the media, the study shows that on the armed battle with IS, the media have rallied around the flag and broadcast unifying messages so much so that human rights violations committed by members of the joint forces against Sunni civilians are overlooked by the Iraqi media. Indeed, the absence of criticism and pluralism on this front reflects the increased influence of the non-state militias in Iraq as well as a possible lack of control regarding their armed activities.

Recent developments in the Iraqi media sector

With the fall of the Baath regime in April 2003, the Iraqi media sector experienced a sudden liberation that brought along the emergence of hundreds of media channels. Between the years 2003 and 2004, more than 150 non-state-owned newspapers, 80 radio stations and 21 television stations were available to the Iraqi audience (Deane 2013: 18).² The Iraqi media landscape acquired a truly pluralistic character, representing all major political forces as well as minorities and regional groups from all parts of the country (Cochrane 2006; Sins 2011; al-Marashi 2007; al-Rawi 2012; Isakhan 2009: 10; Wollenberg 2015). In addition to the newly emerging local media, Iraqi citizens also gained access to more than 300 Arab satellite TV channels, previously banned under the Baath regime.

Other developments included the abolishment of the Iraqi Ministry of Information and the dismissal of 7000 employees, and the return of Iraqi dissidents and expatriates who brought with them experience and media knowledge gained from living and working abroad. The renewal of media ethics and a vivid discourse on the role of media in the development of democracies soon became part of the transformation (Isakhan 2009: 10; Awad & Eaton 2013; Kim & Hama-Saeed 2008).

Today, most Iraqi media outlets have strong ties to political stakeholders. For instance, *al-Ahed TV* is funded by Asayib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)³, *Baghdad TV* is affiliated to the pro-Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party and *al-Furat* to the Supreme Iraqi Islamic

¹ The study was conducted within the framework of a longterm media assistance program of MiCT in Iraq (mict-international.org) with financial support of the German Foreign Office.

² Figures on newly founded media outlets after 2003 vary widely depending on the source. For more information on the wave of startups see Brookings Institution (2008) and Sins (2011).

³ Asayib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) is a Shi'a paramilitary group called "League of the Righteous". They are part of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU; arab: al-Hashd al-Shaabi).

Council (SIIC). Other private channels belong to businessmen closely affiliated to parties and sects, such as *al-Sharqiya TV*, which is owned by secular nationalist Saad al-Bazzaz and considered a moderate pro-Sunni channel (Cochrane 2006; Price, al-Marashi & Stremmlau 2010: 232-324; al-Rawi 2012: 63f.; Isakhan 2009: 10-11; Awad & Eaton 2013; Ghazi 2006; Deane 2013: 18). Funding for media is provided from within Iraq as well as from without by foreign forces, mainly Saudi Arabia, the USA and (on a secondary level) Iran (Isakhan 2009; al-Rawi 2012:105). Isakhan (2009) highlights the harmful impact foreign intervention has had on the development of domestic media, and by extension, on the democratic quality of the public sphere. The US government, in particular, has been widely criticized by many commentators for their repression of dissident voices in the early stages of the occupation and their relentless effort to “manufacture consent” (Isakhan 2009) by manipulating media coverage (Cochrane 2006; Isakhan 2009; Awad & Eaton 2013; al-Rawi 2012; Katulis 2014). Meanwhile, independent media with no ethno-sectarian affiliation have struggled for survival in a media market controlled by political forces and with limited advertising revenue (Wollenberg 2015: 159).

In order to compensate for the partiality and other shortcomings of the private sector, the Public Service Broadcaster the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) was founded by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2004.⁴ According to CPA order 66, the IMN, with its flagship channel *al-Iraqiya*, was intended to reflect and foster the varied values of the Iraqi nation and to work as an integrative force in the society. However, soon after it was founded, the IMN fell under the tight grip of the government and placed the political interest of the government before that of the public (Awad & Eaton 2013; al-Rawi 2012: 72-74; Isakhan 2009; Ghazi 2006; Amos 2010). By comparing election coverage of state-run channel *al-Iraqiya* with coverage on the privately owned channel *al-Sharqiya* in the run up to the provincial elections 2010, Deborah Amos (2010) demonstrated that Iraqi TV stations are actually operating as mouthpieces for the different political camps in Iraq (see also al-Rawi & Gunter 2013).

On a visit to the *al-Iraqiya* studio, then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said: “*Iraqiya* satellite channel is in fact the channel of the Iraqi government, which carries some commitment [...] it should support the Iraqi state with its problems, challenges and achievements [...] it should never be, necessarily, against the policy of the state [...]” (al-Rawi 2012: 98). Consequently, *al-Iraqiya* is perceived by the Iraqi media users as just another party channel representing the interests of the government and its ruling Da’wa party.

In light of the fragmented media landscape, many international observers have voiced their concern about the role the Iraqi media has played in exacerbating conflict (al-Marashi 2007; al-Rawi 2012; Cochrane 2006; Price, al-Marashi & Stremmlau 2010: 237; Deane 2013: 19; Awad & Eaton 2013: 13). James Deane (2013: 6) argues that “as the media fragments in fractured states, many current media and

⁴ The CPA was the US-led transitional government in Iraq that was established right after the fall of the Baath-regime in March 2003.

communication trends are reinforcing and intensifying separate identities rather than encouraging the development of shared identity". In this view, ethno-sectarian rifts represented in the media further escalate ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq. Meanwhile, al-Marashi's (2007) influential analysis of language and partiality among Iraqi TV channels concluded that ethno-sectarian communities were not directly demonized in the media but TV channels tended to portray their communities as victims in Iraq's ongoing violence (ibid.: 88; see also Deane 2013: 19). The question of mobilization and incitement will also be analyzed in this study.

Understanding the role of media in conflict and democratic progress therefore requires the consideration of media use and media literacy in Iraq. Although research on these issues is scarce, there is reason to believe that, based on the authoritarian rule of the past, Iraqi media users maintain a healthy distrust of the local media and their messages. Generally, Iraqis seem to be critical towards media and they have developed a reasonable level of media literacy in order to navigate the complicated and diverse Iraqi media landscape (Isakhan 2009: 20-21, Amos 2010: 7-9).

Although limited in resources and power, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and subsequently the Iraqi government, tried to silence oppositional voices since the beginning of the transformation in 2003. In June 2003, the CPA released Order Number 14 on "Prohibited Media Activities" that rendered illegal a variety of communication activities, including "incitement of violence against Coalition Forces and CPA personnel" as well as "advocating civil disorder" (Isakhan 2009: 14; al-Rawi 2012: 82). Shortly thereafter the CPA closed down *Mosul TV* for rebroadcasting media content from *al-Jazeera*, and in April 2004 the newspaper *al-Hawza* representing the Sadr movement was shut down as well – both interventions effectively fueling the popularity of the Sadr movement on one side and the Sunni resistance on the other (Isakhan 2009: 15-16). In November 2006, TV channels *Zawra* and *Salahiddin* were also shut down for covering public demonstrations protesting the verdict convicting Saddam Hussein of crimes against humanity (Kim & Hama-Saeed 2008: 588; Isakhan 2009: 14; al-Rawi 2012: 83-85).

Over the years, the relationship between opposition media outlets and the government would only grow more hostile. In February 2011, when ten thousand Iraqis took to the streets in Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, Ramadi, and Diwaniya to protest against corruption and poor basic services, journalists were attacked and arrested by security forces for covering the protests.⁵ In June 2012, the regulatory body CMC⁶ published a list of 47 media outlets allegedly lacking official permits, some of which were later suspended (Reporters without Borders 2012). One year later, in

⁵ See report of Human Rights Watch on the February 2011 protests in Erbil, Sulimaniya and Baghdad,

<https://rsf.org/en/news/threat-close-47-radio-and-tv-stations-protests-against-repressive-law>.

⁶ The CMC was founded based on CPA order Number 65 as an independent entity for media regulation to strengthen pluralism and diversity in the Iraqi media landscape. Yet, soon after its foundation, just like the Iraqi Media Network, the CMC was shifted under the control of the government (Isakhan 2009).

April 2013, another ten channels were confronted with a notification of closure by the CMC, this time referring to their alleged incitement of violence related to the turmoil in Hawija (Reporters without Borders 2013).⁷

Despite the many efforts to align public opinion in favor of the government, the persistence of critical voices in the Iraqi public sphere indicates that pluralism in Iraq is indeed resilient (Wollenberg 2015: 160-161). It should be noted, however, that the most powerful restrictions on press freedom are not imposed by the government but by non-state actors (Kim & Hama-Saeed 2008: 586; al-Rawi 2012: 66). Indeed, armed militias and extremist elements regularly target journalists and media outlets who, as a result, are reluctant to tackle delicate issues relating to these groups (Kim & Hama Saeed 2008: 583; Wollenberg 2015; al-Rawi 2012: 101). The death of more than 200 journalists between June 2004 and February 2017, 62% of whom were deliberately killed for political reasons, is a case in point.⁸ It is for this reason that Iraq is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists.

The rise of IS in Iraq also impacted the working environment of journalists and media workers. According to Iraqi journalists, one of the biggest challenges they have had to cope with was the critical and professional coverage of events relating to the fight against IS.⁹ Journalists have stated that they are expected to support the state and non-state troops in their fight and to turn a blind eye on human rights violations committed by these groups. Indeed, the CMC had informed media outlets that reports should focus on the success of the Iraqi army and the supporting Shi'a militias. Not to do so would be unpatriotic.¹⁰ Another challenge for Iraqi journalists is IS' professional communication approach. Besides the official media office *al-Furqan*, the communication machinery of IS in Iraq comprises a conglomerate of central and regional production units in charge of producing and distributing audio-visual media content. Meanwhile, IS is operating more than 300 social media channels.¹¹ Due to their rather late entry into the realm of social media, domestic media players are effectively disadvantaged and far behind in promulgating their views on social media.

⁷ Already in the previous years, the CMC has regularly reprimanded TV-channels with Sunni leanings such as *al-Babeliya*, *Baghdad TV*, *al-Rafidayn*, *al-Sharkiya*, *al-Baghdadiya* (al-Rawi 2012: 89).

⁸ See the online database of the Committee to Protect Journalists <https://cpj.org/killed/mideast/iraq/>.

⁹ This problem was discussed among Iraqi journalists in a training session held in May 2015, that Anja Wollenberg and Maral Jekta attended as staff members of MiCT (Media in Cooperation and Transition).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The production infrastructure of IS in Iraq comprises the video production unit *al-Itissam*, the music production unit *al-Ajnad Foundation*, the media center *al-Hayat* as well as a plethora of regional media offices responsible for the production and distribution of strictly localized media content.

Theoretical framework: variations on media pluralism and its impact on conflict

In the field of communications, pluralism is widely conceptualized as an indicator of the openness of the public sphere and democratic participation. Likewise, a diversity of opinions circulating in the public and a broad and ever-changing spectrum of topics discussed are both manifestations of media pluralism (Neidhardt & Gerhards 1990). Moreover, comprehensive representation, where every community and every strand of the society can see itself as being part of that society, is pivotal for the cohesion of that society and for the communication between the government and its people since only those concerns represented in the public can make their way on to the political agenda (Habermas 1998; Neidhardt & Gerhards 1990; Imhof 2008). Pluralism has also been perceived as a means to prevent any particular ideology or belief from dominating the public sphere and is thus a cornerstone against paternalism and universalism. As such, in media policy-making as well as in academic discourse the concept of pluralism has gradually gained importance in recent history (Karppinen 2007).

Habermas acknowledges pluralism of opinions as a starting point for a deliberative process that ideally leads to consensus on the basis of rational exchange among equally free citizens (Habermas 1998; Sunstein 2002). Mouffe (2007), meanwhile, conceptualizes pluralism as the continuous co-existence of incompatible viewpoints in society and in public debate. Here, healthy democracy is based on contestation, conflict and dissonance (Karppinen 2007). This difference between a consensus-oriented approach and an antagonistic approach is of particular importance in the analysis of young beleaguered democracies that inevitably struggle with the challenges of transformation.

In Iraq, as demonstrated in the previous section, pluralism flourished to a certain extent after the 2003 occupation and it was praised as one of the few democratic achievements in the post-Baath era. But within the context of fragile statehood, the public discourse has over time become increasingly polarized. From a comparative viewpoint the media structure in Iraq quickly gained some of the features of what Hallin and Mancini (2004) conceptualized as the Polarized Pluralist model, such as a low level of professionalism among journalists and media producers, strong affiliations between political parties and media outlets and strongly biased coverage of political conflict. However, due to important contextual factors such as conflict, state size and state role, one can conclude that just as Lebanon, Iraq can be seen as a *variation* of the Polarized Pluralist model that is shaped by violent conflict and fragile statehood (El-Richani 2016).¹²

Iraq is not an exception in this regard and there is reason to believe that democratic pluralism increases the likelihood of conflict in the context of fragile states and transformation. Deane (2013) observed that the pluralistic media landscapes in fragile states such as Iraq and Somalia are often fragmented along the same fault

¹² Cochrane, amongst other commentators, has long spoken of the Lebanonization of Iraqi politics and media (Cochrane 2006).

lines that divide society. Extended access to information and deregulation go hand in hand with co-option of media by political parties: “In short: fractured media markets are also co-opted media environments” (Deane, 2013: 8). Deane also refers to an “echo chamber” pattern in the interaction between conflict-riven societies and the fragmented media sphere that ultimately increases group polarization in the society (Deane, 2013: 9). This observation strongly resonates with the selective exposure paradigm, where media users consume news sources that cater to their already existing convictions. Consequently, if people in the long term avoid viewpoint-challenging information, their society will become more fragmented while commonalities between insulated opinion-communities will dwindle (Sunstein 2002: 4; Garrett 2006: 1).

The question, however, remains: where does one draw the line between a pluralistic media system and a dysfunctional polarized one that jeopardizes the cohesion of society and threatens stability? By analyzing recent media developments in Egypt, Hafez concludes that pluralistic polarization in the public sphere acquires anti-democratic qualities once the political camps start denying each other’s legitimacy. Radical polarization began with the overthrow of long-term Egyptian president Mubarak in 2011 and escalated during the short period of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammad Morsi’s reign culminating in the concurrent collapse of democratic pluralism in the political system and the public sphere. Consequently, Hafez (2014) privileges the idea of a national integrated public sphere for Egypt as it was conceptualized by Habermas (1998). Strengthening conflict and contestation – as demanded by Mouffe (2007) – might help revive democratic debate in Western Europe, he notes. However, in the young unstable democracies in the Middle East and North Africa, where cohesion of society and the integrity of the nation is jeopardized by conflict, a nationally integrated public sphere and the search for common grounds might be more useful to support a peaceful process of transformation.

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative frame analysis on Iraqi channels’ news coverage of domestic conflicts, focusing on what aspects of a certain event were highlighted, how the problem, the protagonists and aims were defined, how the situation was evaluated and what kind of solutions were suggested. This approach draws on Entman’s (1993: 52) definition of framing as the selection of “some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”.¹³

¹³ Quite often positions are articulated without referring to all of the mentioned aspects of a frame. In fact, often explanations for cause and effect are missing and/or reference to a specific solution. Therefore, frame analysis cannot be conducted as a systematic execution of a given procedure but rather as a discursive and interpretative approach.

Framing accentuates a certain angle that the author of a statement or text uses to emphasize specific aspects rather than others. Framing hence creates meaning and implies a certain reading of reality. In the journalistic workflow, frames are often selected and reproduced with no particular intention or even awareness. However, framing has proven to be a subtle but powerful way to enforce political messages in the public sphere (Entman 1993). The research methodology in the study at hand is based on the assumption that, by comparing the different frames that are circulated in a public debate on a given topic, one can draw conclusions about the quality of pluralism and its impact on the political process.

The analysis was conducted as a discursive process in which the three researchers regularly met to discuss and coordinate their observations and interpretations. This way, the validity of the findings was substantiated. In the discussions, the researchers then aimed to identify dominant and peripheral frames and compare Iraqi TV channels in their balance of speakers, frames and messages.

The database comprises 49 main evening news bulletins of 7 different local channels within the week of 16 - 22 August 2015. Each news bulletin comprised an average of 14 items, totaling to 699. The programs were recorded and topics and positions of all news items were logged. Three major events were identified and selected for the analysis:

- Government reform and civic protests
- The release of an investigation report on the fall of Mosul
- Armed encounters between IS and Iraqi military forces in al-Anbar and Salahuddin

A total of 343 relevant news items were transcribed and translated into English. The Arabic recordings were at hand and consulted regularly during the analysis. In the selection of channels, reach and popularity were taken into consideration aiming for a sample of influential channels. More importantly though, the sample was designed to mirror the political diversity of the Iraqi media landscape. As political parallelism is a key feature of the Iraqi media, channels critical and supportive of the government supported by Sunni and Shi'a parties respectively were selected. In addition, the researchers included Kurdish channels as well as the national broadcaster. Finally, a private commercial TV station was included. The following channels were part of the sample:

Al-Iraqiya – main satellite channel of the Iraqi Media Network that was founded in 2003 as umbrella organization for Iraq's public service broadcasters (TV and Radio).

Al-Sharkiya – private channel owned by Saad al-Bazzaz a former crony of Saddam Hussein. *Al-Sharkiya* is allegedly co-financed by Saudi Arabia (al-Rawi 2012; Isakhan 2009).

Al-Ahed – owned by Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Shi'a paramilitary group The League of the Righteous (Asayib Ahl al-Haq/AAH). The channel was founded in 2014 to promote the legitimacy and power of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq.

Al-Taghyir – funded by the prominent Sunni millionaire Khamis al-Khanjar who is at the same time the founder and chairman of the Office of the Arab-Sunni Representative for Iraq.

Al-Sumeria – private channel with headquarters in Beirut. *Al-Sumeria* is the most commercial channel in the Iraqi media landscape with entertainment programs dominating the channel's content (IREX 2012).

Rudaw – funded and financed by Prime Minister of Kurdistan Nechirvan Barzani, nephew of regional president Mahmoud Barzani in 2013.¹⁴

NRT – was founded by Kurdish businessman Shaswar Wahid as an independent channel that would not be affiliated with any party.

The selection of the week monitored (16 - 22 August 2015) for data collection was random and not related to any event or development.

Findings: Internal Pluralism reigns despite partiality

Frames in the news coverage were mainly introduced by speakers, directly or indirectly quoted by the channel (rather than by journalists or anchors themselves). They thus emerged from a patchwork of statements quoted by a channel and contextualized by journalistic comment. In the news coverage pertaining to the three major events listed above, the following frames were identified:

¹⁴ The three channels *al-Ahed*, *Rudaw* and *al-Taghyir* were all founded only recently. Therefore no data on reach and popularity are available at this point in time.

Topics	Frames	Identified on...
Political Reform		
	<i>Critically supporting the reforms:</i> the steps taken by the government are generally endorsed, but speakers demand it to be more comprehensive, clear and to be carried out more quickly.	Al-Iraqiya, al-Sumeria, al-Sharkiya, al-Taghyir, al-Ahed
	<i>Defending the reforms:</i> the reform process is defended against allegations that it is directed at specific individuals with the purpose to settle political scores.	Al-Iraqiya, al-Taghyir, al-Sharkiya, al-Sumeria
	<i>Rejecting the reforms:</i> the integrity and necessity of the reform process altogether is questioned.	Al-Ahed, al-Sharkiya
Mosul Report		
	<i>Defending the committee:</i> the committee is defended against allegations that its work is directed at specific individuals with the aim to settle scores.	Al-Iraqiya, al-Sharkiya, al-Taghyir, al-Sumeria
	<i>Rejecting the report:</i> The legitimacy of the committee and the report is altogether questioned.	Al-Taghyir, al-Sumeria, al-Ahed, al-Sharkiya
	<i>Supporting the report:</i> The release of the report is strongly welcomed.	NRT, Rudaw, al-Sumeria
The armed battle with IS		
	<i>Success of the military forces:</i> The military successes against the “IS terrorists” are in indiscriminately highlighted while any military progress by IS is mostly blanked out.	Al-Iraqiya, al-Sumeria, al-Sharkiya, al-Taghyir, al-Ahed, NRT, Rudaw
	<i>The unity of the joint forces:</i> despite the ethno-sectarian differences between the various armed forces they are unified in the fight against the IS.	Al-Iraqiya, al-Sumeria, al-Sharkiya, al-Taghyir, al-Ahed, NRT, Rudaw
	<i>Joint forces face difficulties:</i> Joint forces struggle and lose soldiers in their fight against the IS.	Al-Taghyir

a. Political Reform

During the week assessed, one of the most dominant themes was the package of reforms introduced by Prime Minister al-Abadi as a response to popular protests. The reforms included decreasing the size of the bloated government by merging ministries, scrapping all the deputy PM positions as well as hundreds of posts draining the coffers of the government. Other reforms included reducing the number of government official body guards by 90%, integrating special battalions with the Ministry of Interior and Defense to participate in the fight against IS and a re-

vision of government officials' high salaries and pensions.

With the exception of the state-owned *al-Iraqiya*, the dominant frame on all channels is supportive of the reforms in principle but also skeptical of the scope and extent of the reform process. In this "critically supportive" frame the steps taken by the government are generally endorsed, but speakers demand it to be more comprehensive and to be carried out more quickly and more efficiently in order to have the necessary impact. Critical supporters warn against slow and partial implementation and they urge the government to include the judiciary and security apparatus in the reform. For instance, in *al-Sumeria's* interview with al-Abadi's spokesperson, the anchor often interrupts him, challenging him about former decisions that were not implemented and the time frame for the implementation of reforms. This criticism is particularly articulated by the civil protesters in the street that perceive the judiciary as a corrupt body itself that is not equipped to facilitate the reform process. In that same vein, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani warns of Iraqi partition, if real reforms were not implemented. The "critically supportive" frame is favored by the two private channels *al-Sumeria* and *al-Sharkiya* and, to a lesser degree, in the news coverage of AAH-owned *al-Ahed* and Sunni-backed *al-Taghyir*.

A second frame, which is prevalent on state-owned *al-Iraqiya*, promotes and defends al-Abadi's reforms. Here, Prime Minister al-Abadi and his spokesman Hadithi deny that the reform process aims to settle scores. They emphasize that the reform is not directed at any specific group, party or individual and they harshly attack the corrupt and privileged for trying to obstruct the reform process and derailing public demands. Al-Abadi and Hadithi also ask the public for patience since the reform is designed as a gradual process that cannot be implemented instantly. In his statements, al-Abadi emphasizes the cooperation with parliament and the council of ministers highlighting the very collective nature of the decision. However, his message to the corrupt is unequivocal: "Let's purge the corrupt out of our institutions and clean them up". This "defending the reforms" frame is also openly promoted on *al-Taghyir*. On the privately owned channels *al-Sumeria* and *al-Sharkiya* it appears in a secondary rank.

On the very periphery of the news coverage of private channel *al-Sharkiya* and AAH-owned *al-Ahed* a strongly critical "rejection of the reform" frame was identified in which the integrity and necessity of the reform process altogether is questioned. On *al-Sharkiya*, Iyad Allawi, chairman of the Iraqi National Coalition and former interim PM, dubs the reform process as pure austerity package asking the parliament to intervene. Meanwhile, *al-Ahed* laments the political system repeatedly referring to it as the "cancer of power-sharing".

The two Kurdish channels of the sample *NRT* and *Rudaw* indicatively barely covered the reforms.

b. *Mosul Report*

The week monitored witnessed the release of the much-awaited Mosul report which was set up to investigate the sudden fall of Mosul into the hands of IS on June 10, 2014. A committee headed by Sadrist MP Hakim al-Zamli, head of the Defense and Security Committee in parliament, listened to more than 400 testimonies over six months to reach a conclusion and name those culpable. The committee blamed security and political leaders, namely former Prime Minister al-Maliki, and called on the judiciary to hold them accountable. Both the committee and the report were attacked for being biased and concerned with “settling scores” and pressure was exerted on the committee to detract names.

The most dominant frame in the news coverage monitored focused on defending, justifying and explaining the work of the committee as well as its methodology and approach. The main message of that “defending the committee” frame was that the work of the committee is unbiased and not based on any agenda. Here the committee is presented as a hard working team that seeks to reveal the truth. The main protagonist of that frame was the head of the inquiry, Hakim al-Zamli, in addition to other members of the investigative committee itself. Al-Zamli accuses the offenders and their allies of exerting pressure on the members of the committee.

Another protagonist in supporting the committee is parliament speaker Salim al-Jbouri, who repeatedly reiterates that the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014 to IS was the fault of security leaders and political figures, namely al-Maliki, who should be held accountable. This frame, supporting the committee and the result of its work, is clearly promoted by the state-owned *al-Iraqiya* but also dominant on the privately owned *al-Sharqiya*. On the private, commercial channel *al-Sumeria* as well as on *al-Taghyir*, which is funded by prominent Sunni millionaire Khamis al-Khanji, who calls himself a “leading advocate for Iraq’s Sunni population”, this frame is included but only tangentially.¹⁵

As mentioned above, the supporting coverage is encountered by a critical frame accusing the committee of being biased and unfair. According to this camp, the committee is a co-opted body abusing its mandate for political gains and the report is non-binding. The “rejecting the report” frame is brought forward by representatives of the State of Law Coalition (MP Awatif Naama) as well as by former Prime Minister al-Maliki who was identified as the main defendant in the report. It is the dominant frame in the news coverage of the AAH-owned channel *al-Ahed*, which hosted a number of experts who poured criticism on the report including Tariq Harb, a legal expert who censures parliament for conducting the inquiry rather than the judiciary, arguing that “parliament is not a police station” and that Iraq remains “far from the culture of separation of power”. An *al-Ahed* reporter also lamented the fact that the committee allegedly overlooked the role of Kurdistan’s president Masoud Barzani “despite existing evidence and documents supporting

¹⁵ See background information on the founder of the Office of the Arab-Sunni representative for Iraq OASRI (<http://www.oasri.org/about-us>).

his role in the conspiracy that led to Mosul's fall”.

The “rejecting the report” frame was also broadly presented by various actors on *al-Taghyir* and *al-Sumeria*. Maliki’s statement made to an Iranian channel where he dubbed the report worthless and a “conspiracy created in Ankara and then transferred to Erbil” is cited on the two channels. *Al-Sumeria* also focused on procedural violations, which they lamented as a victim of Iraq’s quota system and political consensus, ending their report cynically with “all the citizens could do was watch and applause”. Meanwhile, *al-Taghyir* did not attempt to hide their view that Maliki is culpable for the Mosul “catastrophe” and that the report did not fit the tragedy of losing Mosul to the IS.

Meanwhile, the two Kurdish channels *NRT* and *Rudaw* barely covered the release of the Mosul Report, thereby pointing to a separation even on the airwaves of the Northern Iraqi region. There is just one news item during that week on both *Rudaw* and *NRT* covering the release of the report. *Rudaw* cites a Kurdish member of the committee who congratulates the “people of Kurdistan” alongside the Iraqi people on the release of the report and promises them that the deaths of Yazidi, Christian, Kurd and “valiant Peshmerga” martyrs will not be in vain. *NRT* meanwhile cites al-Zamli and reports that Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish officials have finally been named responsible for the fall of Mosul. This “supporting the report” frame was also identified in the periphery of *al-Sumeria*’s coverage.

c. *The armed battle with IS*

The third theme covered during the week is the armed battle against IS. The dominant frame across all channels monitored is the “military success of the Iraqi forces” against the IS terrorists.

All media outlets monitored rally around the flag and offer a generally patriotic coverage of the armed conflict. Indeed, all channels indiscriminately highlight the military successes against the “IS terrorists” while any progress by IS is mostly blanked out in the coverage on armed battle. Private channel *al-Sumeria* also demonstrates unconditional patriotism with their reporters exclusively covering “victories”, “achievements” and the “great efforts” made by security forces to destroy the IS “dens”. *Al-Sumeria*’s patriotic credo is further underlined by the slogan plastered on their screen, “unified Iraq against terrorism”, and a “human interest” story highlighting a Christian fighter who joined the police the day Mosul fell and who is happily “sacrificing” for his countrymen and is loved by his colleagues, who themselves hail from different religions and ethnicities.

The framing, however, varies from the determined patriotism on *al-Sumeria* and state-owned *al-Iraqiya* to the more realistic coverage of private channel *al-Sharqiya*, which even covers some criticism of the security forces. *Al-Iraqiya* highlights the victories of the “brave Iraqi forces” and disregards setbacks faced by the armed forces in their efforts to “cleanse” areas of the “fleeing terrorists”. Commanders of the Iraqi armed forces interviewed by the state television channel even

give the impression that the city of Fallujah would be freed in a matter of days, when in fact it took almost another year. *Al-Sharqiya*, on the other hand, cites the Vice Chairman of Anbar Provincial Council who calls on security forces to move the confrontation with IS away from the residential eastern areas of Ramadi.

The “unity of the joint forces” frame, namely security forces, the councils, the police, commanders of different brigades, PMU militias, Christian fighters and the Zeravani or the Kurdish police forces is also another dominant frame common across the spectrum of TV channels, even in Khamis al-Khanjar’s *al-Taghyir* which has clear reservations regarding the PMU and even seems to equate them with IS. The channel, for instance, runs an ad during the newscast of a rotating coin with IS on the one side and “Iraqi militias” on the other followed by a statement reading that IS and the militias are two sides of the same coin. In that same vein, *al-Taghyir* is the only channel that talks about difficulties faced by the national forces in their fight against IS and that reports on dozens of soldiers killed and injured. It also has a different assessment of the battles of Baiji where “IS fought strongly”. Hence, with a “joint forces face difficulties” frame, *al-Taghyir* slightly deviates from the otherwise ubiquitous “success of Iraqi forces”-frame, that offers no space for the mentioning of victims and struggle on the side of the joint forces.

The key speakers in all the stations are security and military officials ranging from the Ministry of Defense to security forces representatives and media units of the armed forces. Representatives of PMU including commanders, media units and leaders as well as members of Anbar provincial council and tribes are also cited. Needless to say, no IS representative or IS statement is ever cited on any of the channels; state-owned *al-Iraqiya* even accentuates the number of IS members killed and areas “cleansed”.

Despite minor variations, on IS at least, we can conclude that there is more or less a consensus on supporting the national security forces and non-state militias in their battle against IS. Nevertheless, the channels differ in how they attribute military progress against IS. *Al-Taghyir* highlights the importance of air strikes carried out by the international forces, while *al-Ahed*, which runs an ad calling for financially supporting the resistance in its fight against IS, focuses on the progress made by the PMU. State owned *al-Iraqiya*, meanwhile, as stated above and as is expected, focuses on the Iraqi army’s victories.

Unlike the other themes that the Kurdish channels barely report on, Kurdish channels *Rudaw* and *NRT* offer considerably more coverage on the battle with IS. *NRT* covers the advances made by the Iraqi army forces and the PMU in western Ramadi while the coverage of the battles on subsequent days is mainly about the Kurdistan related battles and topics. Here, successes of the Peshmerga are highlighted alongside the aerial bombardment carried out by the international coalition. Perhaps what is most striking in the coverage of *NRT* is that they refer to IS fighters as ‘militants’ rather than ‘terrorists’.

Apart from the advances of the Iraqi forces into Ramadi, *Rudaw* barely covers the

battles waged by the Iraqi army and the PMU. Instead, the Peshmerga battles are given much more attention. *Rudaw* repeatedly cites exclusive sources and information which point to the beat systems between them and the Peshmerga. They condemn the practice of training children by IS and the PMU but fail to criticize teenage Peshmerga fighters interviewed in another item. Furthermore, this patriotic Kurdish channel also refers to Qamishly and Hasaka – cities located in Eastern Syria – as “West Kurdistan”.

Conclusion: pluralism on everything except IS

There is consensus among observers that the media in Iraq are biased and partial and the findings of this study confirm this notion. The Iraqi TV channels covered in the study reflect the ethno-sectarian and political diversity extant in Iraq. However, despite the close link between political actors and the media, the findings reveal that the Arab channels monitored juxtapose a variety of frames in their coverage of the divisive issues of the Mosul report and the reform process. Naturally, each channel favors frames in accordance with their political agendas. But, with the exception of the state-owned *al-Iraqiya*, most channels monitored strove to include a fairly broad bandwidth of different frames in their news coverage, thereby providing audiences with diverse viewpoints on these issues. Partisanship in the news coverage of Iraqi media therefore does not mean the exclusion of voices that oppose the general agenda of the channel. This is particularly true for the private channels *al-Sharkiya* and *al-Sumeria*, which both exert an obvious effort to balance existing frames. Political inclinations remain obvious among all channels monitored, and the AAH-owned *al-Ahed* stands out in this regard, but the coverage overall does not dogmatically and exclusively stick to one frame only. One can conclude therefore that media users who tend to follow news of only one channel will be exposed to actors and opinions of the opposing camps as well.¹⁶ The precarious echo-chamber effect, therefore, is effectively mitigated by this relative internal pluralism.

Generally, however, the media system is characterized by external pluralism where each camp has a reasonable share in the public sphere and where political discourse, as expected, is pluralistic. In the debate surrounding the reform package, all stakeholders were included in the coverage: the government, the protesters, experts and critics as well as religious authorities. Likewise, in the debate on the Mosul report, all opinions were represented: defenders of the committee and the publication of the report, representatives of the committee, critics of the process and its outcome, suspects and people concerned about the consequences of the report.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, the Iraqi public sphere appears to be more of an in-

¹⁶ This statement is not valid for media users that watch the state-owned *al-Iraqiya* only.

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that those directly affected by the reforms had very little opportunity to take a stand on the matter. Only the privately-owned channel *al-Sumeria* dedicated a long news item to staff members of the abolished Ministry of Human Rights. “The corrupt elements” targeted by the reforms are also not given a voice.

tegrative force than a source of division and exclusion. However, it should be noted that this study has also revealed a deep rift between Kurdish and Arab channels regarding the selection of topics. While the reform process and the release of the Report on Mosul dominated the news bulletins in all Arab channels, these issues were barely mentioned on the Kurdish channels monitored.

On a different front, the manner in which the battle with IS was covered differs considerably from the coverage surrounding the fall of Mosul and the reforms. Indeed, it appears that even in an ostensibly fragmented nation as Iraq, the media adopted a patriotic unifying frame on the fight against IS and the military conflict in al-Anbar and Salahuddin in particular. The legitimacy and efficacy of the fight against IS itself is uncontested. In their news coverage, all channels agree on the same external/internal enemy and hence on the same conflict pattern: the Iraqi people/the Iraqi state against the terrorists. The key message of that frame is that the PMU and Iraqi army are stronger than IS and that victory is imminent. The second key message is that IS is by and large “an evil force” that needs to be eliminated. The frames identified differed only by way of crediting victories against IS to different groups of fighters – the Iraqi army, the PMU fighters, the Peshmerga and the international coalition. Depending on the outlet’s agenda, the troops of choice are accentuated. Pluralism of opinions is here replaced by a pluralism of nuances in the same narrative of the same story. Only *al-Taghyir* deviates from the otherwise ubiquitous “success of Iraqi forces” frame by mentioning losses and difficulties faced by the joint forces.

While the conformity of news coverage might raise optimism regarding the unity of the nation against an external enemy, the limited space given to voices wary of the non-state militias reveals a lack of control over these groups on the battlefield and beyond. Human rights violations committed by the PMU during the liberation of Tikrit and other cities in the north of the country have gone almost unnoticed in the local media.¹⁸ Given the military strengths and political power of the PMU and its more than 100,000 fighters, this status of sanctity must be considered a threat to state stability and the rule of law (see also Wyer 2012; TRAC 2015; Steinberg 2016).

Another significant finding is the absence of hate speech or racism. Still, strident statements such as those made by former PM al-Maliki referring to the head of the Mosul inquiry, al-Zamli, as a murderer or dubbing the fall of Mosul a conspiracy spun by Turkey in collaboration with Erbil are broadcast. Drawing on Hafez’s discussion on legitimacy (2014), this denial of al-Zamli’s legitimacy to lead an inquiry may be perceived as a dysfunctional and a radically polarizing mode of communication. However, in all instances, al-Maliki’s statements were contextualized and combined with opposing statements and additional information including a statement from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Therefore, these strident re-

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch (2015). Ruinous Aftermath. Militias Abuses Following Iraq’s Recapture of Tikrit. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/09/20/ruinous-aftermath/militias-abuses-following-iraqs-recapture-tikrit>

marks cannot be deemed as inciting to violence or hatred.¹⁹

Iraq is a beleaguered and fragile state. As in other fragile states, the media landscape is fractured alongside conflict lines and the majority of media channels have strong ties to political parties or movements. But contrary to allegations accusing the Iraqi media of fueling division, our study has shown that media largely refrain from attacking or delegitimizing “the other” and that considerable pluralism both on the level of the media system and within the most popular and mainstream media outlets exists. However, as shown above, this pluralism is limited to political topics rather than in the coverage of the armed battle with IS. It is our hope that these observations could serve as a starting point to reassess existing theories about the impact of Iraqi media on conflict propagation.

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¹⁹ It should be noted that racism, defamation and hate speech seems to be a ubiquitous problem in social media. In addition, there are local radio stations and newspapers that seem to engage in racism and hate speech in their communities. However, this study examined only mainstream and popular TV channels. Therefore, conclusions can only be drawn for this segment of the media system.

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