

## The US Influence in Shaping Iraq's Sectarian Media

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### Abstract

After the Anglo-American invasion, the US neo-conservative administration established the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003, which included 25 members selected for their ethnic and religious origins; it was the most obvious sign of the US political separatist strategy. As a result of the new political reality, the Iraqi media was divided into ethno-sectarian lines, resulting from previous policies followed by the US Administration. This paper argues that the US media policy prior and after the US invasion of Iraq played a part in enhancing and encouraging the sectarian divisions in the Iraqi society. This was mainly done by sending biased media messages through the state-run Iraqi Media Network (IMN) and other US-aligned channels and allowing militant voices from different Iraqi sides to wage wars of words without interfering. In fact, the only time US officials interfered is when they are criticized by Iraqi media outlets. This study cites different US government reports, accounts from media practitioners who worked for IMN and other journalists that monitored the Iraqi media.

Keywords: sectarian media; Iraqi media; Arab media; US occupation; sectarianism; War on Iraq; information intervention; post- conflict media; media development; partisan media

## Introduction:

This paper argues that US authorities in Iraq after 2003 assisted in politically and socially dividing the country along sectarian and ethnic lines by their interference in shaping Iraq's media and the whole political system. Some of the main sources of this paper are taken from the US government reports recently released by the National Security Archive.

Media scholars have been arguing about the importance of studying post-conflict media developments especially after the hate speech lessons learnt from former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Cambodia (Price 2000). Assisted by different governments, international media organizations and non-governmental organizations were thought to be responsible for forming independent and professional media organizations post-conflict nations in order to assist in the overall development process. For example, the Department of Media Affairs in Kosovo was created by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in August 1999 that has the 'responsibility for media regulation, support for independent media, media monitoring, and the development of media standards' (Palmer 2001, 185). The same plan was meant to be applied in Iraq after the 2003 invasion with the efforts of international media organizations and state interventions. However, as will be illustrated below, the kind of foreign government intervention far exceeded the other efforts, ultimately leading to the failure of independent media projects.

After the Anglo-American occupation, the Coalition Provisional Authority decreed that the Iraqi Ministry of Information be dissolved; the decision led to the release of thousands of government workers. Another CPA media regulation followed. Order No. 14 issued on June 10 2003 under the title 'Prohibited Media Activity' stated that media organizations are not allowed to publish or broadcast material that: 'incites violence against any individual or group, including racial, ethnic or religious groups and women; incites civil disorder, rioting or damage to property; incites violence against Coalition Forces or CPA personnel'. However, this order was later applied to safeguard the CPA alone. Don North observed that US forces started to visit the headquarters of Iraqi newspapers that made offences and created great damage to the property. North even went as far as saying: 'If *The Washington Post* reported terrorist threats or bin Laden statements in Baghdad today, it would probably be closed down' (2004). Since the CPA

was in charge of the country and the media sector, it became ‘the judge and jury’ (Reporters Sans Frontières 2010, 3) at the same time.

One of the first radio stations closed down by the CPA was *Sawt Baghdad* (Voice of Baghdad) after only one month from its launch (RSF July 2003). On June 12, 2003 Coalition forces closed down *Sada al-Uma* (The nation’s echo) newspaper in Najaf stating that it incited violence against coalition troops by inviting the people of Najaf to join the Sunni resistance in Ramadi city in Anbar province (Rohde 2003; Barry 2003). Also, the CPA ordered the closure of *Al-Mustaqila* (independent) newspaper in July 2003 after publishing an article ‘proclaiming the killing of spies who cooperate with the United States to be a religious duty’ (Freedom House 2004). But probably the worst decision taken by the CPA was closing Muqtada Sadr’s newspaper *al-Hawza al-Natiqa al-Sharifa*. Sadr’s hard line Shiite movement strongly opposes the occupation. On 28 March, 2003 US forces confiscated the weekly newspaper’s last edition together with the editions of a quarterly journal called *al-Mada*. The newspaper was accused of fermenting violence against American forces in Iraq, so its office was closed for sixty days. Following the closure of the newspaper, an insurrection erupted in almost all Shiite areas in the country (Rosen 2004a; Rosen 2004b).

Price (2007) observes that the CPA saw the media regulations as a ‘military necessity’ (2007, 16) which reflects the fear US officials had from what is known as ‘irresponsible journalism’. However, the CPA’s fast and sometimes violent reaction toward any anti-US media outlet and its inaction toward other channels that incited violence and hatred against fellow Iraqi sects, groups, and religions show that the US administration was only concerned about its own safety and the security of its soldiers. Surely, this careless and one-sided policy encouraged many Iraqi media channels, that were newly established, to be more polarized and extreme in their criticism and attacks against other fellow Iraqis because of the unlimited freedom given to them. Before discussing the details of the US media intervention in Iraq, it is important first to discuss the media impact on audience since the theory is relevant to Iraq’s media context.

Theoretical Framework:

According to the agenda-setting theory, people get to understand the world around them and the issues covered through the perspective of the media since ‘citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists’ report about these events and situations’ (McCombs 2004, 1). In other words, the media sets its own agenda (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Entman, 1989) and shapes certain beliefs (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). If certain issues are continuously repeated in the media, they become more important for the public. ‘The agenda of the news becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public’ (McCombs 2004, 2). However, when certain issues are related to the people’s core beliefs like their religion and creed, the issues start to have much more importance and influence over the way people behave (McCombs 2004, 138). In this case, the media can have a very effective role in driving the people toward certain actions. For example, during civil wars, the media is known to have assisted in justifying ‘mass violence’ through the ‘constructions of ethnophobia’ or sectarian animosity; the media is used to ‘escalate hatred and spread fear against one another’ and as a ‘centerpiece of the struggle between factions’ (Erni 2005).

The other important concept that is relevant to this research is ideology. Thompson (1990) asserts that ideology is a ‘meaning in the service of power’ (7); hence, the official media is part and parcel of political system controlling the country. The media becomes a mere tool to convey the ideology of the ruling political party. Accordingly, the media messages that were sent were loaded with harmful effects. Hall (1985) suggests that journalists working in different media channels are influenced by their own ideology even if they have not noticed or have not acknowledged it as they are ‘inscribed by an ideology to which they do not consciously commit themselves, and which, instead, “writes them”’ (101). Further, van Dijk (1998) stressed that ideologies can distinguish between the different groups in a given society, and they mostly determine how ‘groups and their members view a specific issue or domain of society’ (65).

The new political reality drove Iraq to obvious divisions. ‘Quotas are obligatory; power is rigidly contested on sectarian and ethnic lines. Deadlock often ensues, with each community seeing politics as winner-takes-all. It is resolved only when a kingmaker’s pressure finds a last-minute solution’ (Shadid 2010). Indeed, the Iraqi politico-religious had in most cases conflicting agendas and ideologies that played a negative role in further

dividing the different sects and races. Almost all of these parties have had different media channels such as terrestrial or satellite television stations, radio channels, newspapers, magazines, websites, forums, blogs ...etc. Accordingly, the media became divided along ethno-sectarian lines, and it created a great deal of confusion, chaos, and risk for all the journalists involved (Al-Qaisi and Jabbar 2010). Many Iraqi journalists became polarized either toward their sect, race, or region in order to seek protection or win the favor of their party or community leaders (Al-Rawi 2010). On the other hand, Iraqi audiences started to consume the media that fits into their religious, ethnic, or political backgrounds which is also the case in America where TV audience is heterogeneous that resides to their preferred political trend (Morris 2007). In other words, the partisan media in Iraq assisted in forming and unifying the ideology of the different segments in the society because it was their main source of information. Before discussing how this phenomenon developed, it is important to understand the media scene before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

#### An Overview of Iraq's Media Before 2003

During Saddam Hussein's rule, the Iraqi media was completely state-controlled as it is mostly the case in today's Arab world (UNDP 2009, 65). Social and moral values and norms were all dictated to the public via the mass media. Though media censorship was one of the strictest in the region, some Iraqi journalists were able to publicly voice their criticism against the government, but they would usually face a severe punishment mostly imprisonment and a possible consequent torture. Reporters Sans Frontières described Hussein as a 'predator of press freedom' who managed the Iraqi media with 'an iron fist and has given them the single mission of relaying his propaganda' (2002, 3 & 1).

Despite all the limitations faced by Iraqi journalists and the media shortcomings, the Iraqi media did not witness the sectarian rhetoric that is so prevalent today. If there was any breach, the punishment varied based on the case itself, but it ranged from imprisonment of less than seven years to payment of a fine. Saddam Hussein's government was very adamant and serious about applying the rules above.

These strict rules entailed that journalists should be very careful when they write. Terms like ‘Shiites’ or ‘Sunnis’ were never used in the media. Also, the surnames of Iraqi officers and officials were mostly not revealed so that their sect or race would not be known (Bengio 1985, 13 & 14). In fact, Saddam Hussein was aware of the sensitivity which accompanies the issue of sectarianism especially that Iran waged a fierce propaganda campaign during the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988) to win Iraqi Shiites by its side. Hence, Shiite political parties and the flagellation ceremonies were banned, but the Iraqi government used to air speeches by famous Shiite clerics during certain religious events in order to address more Iraqis. On the other hand, Saddam Hussein’s government prohibited Sunni fundamental movements like the Saudi backed Wahabism, Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood. Many official books were published and TV shows aired to counter extreme religious propaganda coming from abroad. As for the Kurds, the Iraqi government stood against the Kurdish race chauvinism, fearing the instability and disunity that may be ensued in the country. However, there were many Kurdish language publications, and the language itself was taught in some high schools in Baghdad unlike the case in neighboring countries where Kurdish language was banned. In fact, Saddam Hussein’s aim was to establish a secular political system that is the only guarantee to secure a unified Iraq and to avoid religious or ethnic rifts that would cost him lives, efforts, and money. However, when the US invasion occurred in 2003, Iraqis were amazed to openly read about and listen to the words ‘Shiite’ or ‘Sunni’ mentioned; this was the new media reality that they faced. Since the media scene is a direct reflection of the political reality in Iraq, it is important to discuss the political developments after the US invasion.

### The New Political Scene

When the US Army invaded Iraq, there was no clear planning for what comes after the end of military operations. This fact led the country into chaos. First, the looting occurred which was mostly sanctioned by the US Army that only shielded the Iraqi Ministry of Oil and ignored to protect the rest of Iraq’s infrastructure such as the other ministries, universities, libraries, and museums (Baker, Ismael, and Ismael 2010). But what was striking is the way the US Administration tried to rule the country and create a political

system that would ultimately segregate the society. It theoretically divided the country into groups, sects, and ethnicities following the divide and rule strategy. The formation of the Iraqi Governing Council was the first step. Afterward, the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 came which was co-written by American experts (Wong 2005); the Constitution opened the door for the idea of federalism and a possible future division especially for the Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south. After the 2010 elections and the way the Shiite led government of Al-Maliki monopolized power, Sunnis in the center also demanded an autonomous region similar to Kurdistan in order to protect themselves and avoid injustice and inequality (Zurutuza 2012). In other words, the various calls for creating federal regions in the country have become a clear manifestation of the sectarian and ethnic divide that inflicted the country after 2003. Indeed the United States government ‘created institutions based on sectarianism in its reconstruction of Iraq’ (The Saban Center for Middle East Policy 2007). Further, several American politicians were in favor of dividing Iraq into three separate states. For example, Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, suggested a complete division after the beginning of the war. The Fund for Peace propagated a ‘managed partition’ in the same year (Baker 2003/2007). Also, the current US Vice President Joe Biden, and the then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called for a ‘soft partition’ of Iraq in 2006 (Joseph and O’Hanlon 2007). During Biden’s visit to Iraq as Vice President in July 2009, some Iraqi politicians feared the dire consequences of his old proposal of dividing the country into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite parts. For instance, the Sunni Arab politician, Osama Nujaiifi, said that Biden’s proposal would have driven the country into ‘bloodshed and wars between the sects over borders and resources, to the persecution of minorities and all kinds of problems’ (Sly 2009). The various politico-religious parties played a damaging role in polarizing Iraqis which has been directly reflected in their different partisan media channels. As a result of the US policy, Iraqis became more attached to their sect and ethnic origins. Ismael and Fuller (2009) and Visser (2007/2008) argue that the US administration intended to weaken and control Iraq by manufacturing sectarianism and encouraging schisms.

Furthermore, the threat of al-Qaeda and its alike-groups against Iraqi Shiites on one hand and the Mahdi Army and Badr Brigades’ Death Squads against Sunnis on the

other hand deepened the sectarian divisions. But the culmination of this tension between the two major sects in Iraq occurred after the bombing of the holy Shiite shrine in Samara on February 22, 2006. At this stage, the US army did not play its expected role in claming down the situation since it merely observed from afar. The award-winning journalist, Nir Rosen, depicted this gloomy picture about the situation in Iraq in late 2006 during which ‘the Americans were merely one more militia among the many, watching, occasionally intervening, and in the end only making things worse (2006). It is correct to mention here that the differences between the Iraqi sects and races were in existence long before the US presence. However, Saddam Hussein’s secular state hindered any efforts to incite violence or make schisms between the different sects and religions, as discussed earlier. Anthony Shadid rightly says that the US occupation has not created these differences, ‘but facilitated all of it, giving space to the region's worst impulses’ (Shadid 2009). After February 2006, the internal conflict in Iraq reached a level that can be termed as civil war. It entailed ‘the hardening of ethno-sectarian identities, a sea change in the character of the violence, ethno-sectarian mobilization, and population displacements’ (National Intelligence Estimate 2007, 7). Again, the Iraqi media, which is the product of this new political reality, played a role in widening the sectarian rift as will be discussed below.

Indeed, the American inaction toward the conflict was a direct reason behind the escalation of violence. This was also accompanied by a complete carelessness from the Iraqi government led by two Shiite Prime Ministers who both belonged to Dawah Party: Ibrahim al-Ja’afri and then Nouri al-Maliki from May 2006. The obvious reason behind the Iraqi government’s failure to act was the fact that it took its popular support from the Mahdi Army and other militant Shiite groups. After President Bush’s refusal to have al-Ja’afari as a PM, al-Maliki was selected, but he was also criticized by the US administration for his weakness to confront Muqtada Sadr and disband his armed militia that was responsible for the majority of sectarian killing and civilian displacement (Beehner 2006).

Colonel Mansoor, the founding director of the US Army and Marine Corps' counterinsurgency center, reveals that it was only when General David Petraeus became the commander of US forces in Iraq in January 2007 that a change in policy occurred.



‘The strategy emphasized protecting Iraqi civilians instead of simply killing bad guys’. This change meant a 30,000 soldiers increase known as the US forces ‘surge’. After agreeing to form the anti-Qaeda Sahwa (Awakening) forces largely from the members of the Sunni insurgency and the break up of Shiite militias, the violence started to ebb (Levinson 2010). Before the surge, the US Army was only focused on fighting insurgents and other suspects who might attack American soldiers. For example, the spokesperson of the Iraqi Army, General Qassim Atta, revealed in 2009 that an insurgent called Yasser al-Takhi, who belonged to Jaish (Army) Mohammed group, was caught and confessed to killing and raping the Iraqi female correspondent Atwar Bahjat who worked for Al-Arabiya TV channel. al-Takhi was twice arrested by US forces in Iraq in October 2003 and by the end of 2006. However, he was released in both cases because ‘the Americans only investigated him for attacks against them’, according to Atta (Agence France-Presse 2009). In brief, the US Army had a role in facilitating the tension and hatred between the two sects by its inaction, negligence, and carelessness. Before further elaborating on the post-2003 media scene, we need to discuss the US media plan for Iraq in early 2003.

#### The Rapid Reaction Media Team

Long before the US invasion, the US government was involved in propaganda activities against Iraq in order to topple the Baath regime. A great deal of money was channeled through the media outlets of some Iraqi opposition groups such as Iyad Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord and Ahmed al-Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress. These propaganda activities intensified with the approach of the war.

Amid the preparation to wage a war on Iraq and change its political system, Bush’s neo-conservative administration established the Office of Special Plans (OSP) as part of the Department of Defense in October 2002. The OSP was originally created by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz to ‘shape public opinion and American policy toward Iraq’ (United States Department of Defence, Inspector General 2007, 3). It was also partly responsible for forming a new face for the Iraqi media together with the Pentagon’s Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict Office, specialized in psychological warfare (Lobe 2007; Battle 2007). As a result of the work of the two

Pentagon's bodies, the 'Rapid Reaction Media Team' (RRMT) was formed in mid-January 2003 before the invasion. Working under Wolfowitz was Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, who became in charge of the plans of post-war Iraq including the 'White Paper' project. In fact, Feith's involvement in Iraq goes back to the 1990s. Together with other analysts, he wrote a report entitled 'Clean Break' in 1996 for Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in which he mentioned the need to topple Saddam Hussein's government and divide the Arab world in order to serve the interests of Israel (Borger 2003). They also mentioned that post-Saddam Iraq might be plagued by the rise of sectarianism leading to a possible political division of the country. Clearly, the policy of divide and rule was on the back of those analysts' heads when they wrote their report (Zunes 2006). In his autobiography, Feith admits that he pointed out the possibility of 'Some serious problems' such as 'sectarian violence, power vacuum'. In another context, he clearly mentions that 'We warned about rioting, looting, sectarian fights...' (Feith 2009, 275 & 363); however, little if no action was taken by the US administration to prevent the looting and sectarian fight.

Later, the RRMT formed the nucleus of the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) whose establishment was supervised by the Media Development Department in the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Aid (ORHA), led by Bob Reilly (NSA September 2006). Reilly, the director of Voice of America, was known to be an 'outspoken right-wing ideologue' who worked in the 1980s as a 'propagandist in the White House for the Nicaraguan contras' (Dauenhauer and Lobe 2003). Noteworthy, the US government has a long history in interfering in the Republic of Nicaragua's media (see Norsworthy 1994). The director of ORHA reported directly to Douglas Feith 'receiving very broad policy goals, objectives, and policy direction' (Department of Defense, Office of the Inspector General 2004, 1). The RRMT's main task was to initiate a "quick start bridge" between Saddam Hussein's state-controlled media network and a longer term "Iraqi Free Media" network in post Saddam era' (United States Department of Defense 2003, 1). With an initial budget of \$49 million, the media project was greatly significant because it set out the whole strategy on the ground. For instance, the document suggests different themes for broadcasting such as: 'De-Baathification program', 'Recent history telling (e.g. "Uncle Saddam," History channel's "Saddam's Bomb Maker," "Killing Fields")';

‘Environmental (Marshlands re-hydration’; ‘Restarting the Oil’; ‘War Criminals/Truth Commission’. These themes were later recurrent on the official Iraqi TV, al-Iraqia. In addition, Programs were proposed to be executed by RRMT such as: ‘Political prisoners and atrocity interviews’; ‘Saddam’s palaces and opulence’; WMD disarmament’ (ibid., 3). Again, these shows were made into documentaries repeatedly shown on different Iraqi state-aligned TV channels. Also, the document states the need to ‘[i]dentify/vet US/UK/Iraqi “media experts team”’ such as Siyamend Othman; Hussein Sinjari’ (ibid., 2). In 20 April 2004, the US Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) appointed the former Kurd as the CEO of the Iraqi National Communications and Media Commission (NCOM) which became the first Iraqi media regulatory body (CPA Press Release, 2004). In fact, the ‘White Paper’ was written by two US agencies that were directly involved in propaganda for the US government. For example, Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), which works closely with the CIA, was assigned by the Pentagon to form a ‘government in exile’, including five Iraqis to run the new media channels (Chatterjee 2004). In fact, Douglas Feith himself was a former SAIC vice-president. SAIC had close connections with Ahmed Al-Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress, who was the main source of Iraq’s WMDs myths (Alexander 2004). Later, SAIC’s corporate vice president for Strategic Assessment and Development, Christopher Ryan Henry, also worked for the Pentagon as Deputy Under Secretary of Defence serving with Feith (Dauenhauer and Lobe 2003). At one stage, SAIC hired David Kay, Iraq’s weapons inspector, as its vice president; Kay, who was commissioned by the CIA to head Iraq’s weapons program, urged the US administration to wage a war against Saddam Hussein because of the alleged WMDs (Chatterjee 2004).

SAIC received \$108.2 million to run IMN, including a TV and radio station and *Al-Sabah* newspaper (Haner 2004). After the 2003 invasion, the most prominent Iraqi exiles who worked for IMN were: Shameem Rassam (herself an SAIC subcontractor) (Barker 2008, 120), George Mansour, Alaa Fa’ik, Ahmed Al-Rikabi, and Isam Al-Khafaji. Indeed, the Iraqi media was designed as a tool used to strengthen the US control over the country and to increase the public acceptance of its actions despite the pretence that IMN was planned to be an independent media body. The document, for instance, mentions the need to have a “‘hand-selected”’ ‘US-trained Iraqi media teams

immediately in-place to portray a new Iraq (by Iraqis for Iraqis) with hopes for a prosperous, democratic future, will have a profound psychological and political impact on the Iraqi people' (United States Department of Defense 2003, 1). Those Iraqi media experts are supposed to work as the cover or '(“the face”) for the USG [United States Government]/coalition sponsored information effort' (ibid, 2). This technique was later literally followed by the US Army on the ground as shown below.

Most importantly, RRMT highlighted the importance of devising a divided Iraqi media that represents the three major parts in the Iraqi society: Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Though the report claims that the Iraqi media has to work on 'stabiliz[ing] Iraq (especially preventing the trifurcation of Iraq after hostilities)' (ibid.), there is an indication that the US government wanted to stress the 'internal divisions' in the Iraqi society (Battle 2007). For instance, the document proposes printing an Iraqi newspaper 'with section for...Shia news, Kurd news, and Sunni news' (United States Department of Defense 2003, 2). Indeed, this policy foreshadows the events that followed during which the Iraqi media became characterized by its ethno-sectarian orientations.

### The US Army and Iraq's Media

When the US Army invaded Iraq, it started to study how to penetrate into the newly established Iraqi media in order to guarantee that 'friendly' channels cover its activities. US PSYOP officers DeCarvalho, Kivett, and Lindsey mentioned that an Iraqi media section was formed by their department to monitor the media, send press releases, and establish good relations with more than a dozen Iraqi media outlets (2007, 91). Following the 'White Paper' project, they revealed that the best way to address the Iraqi public was to make Iraqis themselves speak on behalf of the US government since 'putting an Iraqi face on the story; an Iraqi reporter talking to fellow Iraqis has a much greater effect on the psyche than if a coalition reporter told the story' (2007, 92). It is important to note here that the US Army supported Iraqi media channels that covered its activities in a favorable manner and vice versa, which is part of its communication strategy. However, it has certainly harmed other media outlets that sought to remain distant. In this regard, an Iraqi independent TV journalist called, Abdel-Hakim (pseudonym), revealed the

difficulties faced by his colleagues, saying that ‘U.S. forces often tell such journalists they are not allowed to cover certain events’, but ‘if they insist, they have been known to be arrested or killed’. If a journalist is killed, “‘the U.S. military spokesman says they were killed by accident’”. On the other hand, ‘journalists working for television stations directly supported by coalition forces have been given permission to cover the same events’ (Allen 2006).

Furthermore, Colonel Thomas M. Cioppa (2009) mentions that the US Army in Iraq used the Strategic Communication Approach which entails ‘monitoring, measuring, analyzing, and assessing’ (27) media messages in order to understand the Iraqi and Pan-Arab media in relation to the events taking place in the country. Cioppa claims that the aim behind their project is to ‘promote Iraqi security, political and economic progress, refute inaccurate and misleading reporting, and develop Government of Iraq (GoI) strategic communication capability to do the same, in order to minimize the effects of sectarianism and advance political reconciliation in Iraq’ (27). However, it is not clear how the Strategic Communication Approach tried to ‘minimize’ the effect of sectarianism as the emphasis is on how the Iraqi and Arab media depict US forces and how to establish timely and effective contacts with these channels. There is no reference to stories or reports that promote unity among Iraqis. Instead, Cioppa defines ‘good news’ stories (32) as those related to ‘progress and stability’ in the country, which is directly connected to the US presence.

On the other hand, news reports in 2005 revealed that the US ‘Information Operations Task Force’ with the help of a US contractor, Lincoln Group, were engaged in ‘planting’ ‘storyboards’ in the Iraqi press. Iraqi journalists who expressed their willingness to help the US military were paid \$400 to \$500 on a monthly basis to write favorable articles in the Iraqi media. More than 1000 articles were planted in several Iraqi newspapers like *Al-Mutamar*, *Al-Mada*, and *Addustour*. These newspapers agreed to publish the articles in return for money paid by the US contractor, ranging from \$40 to \$2,000. IMN’s TV channel, Al-Iraqia, aired anti-violence advertisements which were sponsored by this media group, too (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005). The aim of this ‘dubious scheme’ was to ‘burnish the image of the US mission in Iraq’, ‘trumpet the work of the U.S. and Iraqi troops, denounce insurgents and tout U.S.-led efforts to rebuild

the country' (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005; Gerth 2005; White and Graham 2005, A01). However, the Pentagon did not regard these activities as illegal as they targeted a foreign audience. According to the US Army, the term 'merchandising' is introduced which allows a PSYOP's officer to give gifts to journalists and others in order to polish the image of the Army. 'The best way of disseminating a message might be to print it on a matchbox, a toy, a novelty, or a trinket. A soccer ball marked "Gift of the United States" and given to a schoolboy might get the message of American friendship across more effectively than any conventional medium' (US Army Field Manual 1994, 9-9). Despite the harsh criticism from different media organizations, US government media efforts continued and greatly expanded in 2008. With a budget of \$300 million, the project was supposed to run for three years to 'produce undercover news stories, entertainment programmes and public service advertisements for Iraqi media in an effort to "engage and inspire" the local population to support United States policy'. The contractors involved in these 'media services' are: SOSi, Lincoln Group, MPRI and Leonie Industries which are supposed to plant '30- and 60-minute broadcast documentary and entertainment series' in different Iraqi TV channels (Young and Pincus 2008, A01). Most importantly, the storyboards were classified in a pattern that resembles the 'White Paper' project; for example, each story 'had a target audience, "Iraq General" or "Shi'ia," with a dominant theme like "Anti-intimidation" or "Success and Legitimacy of the ISF" (Gerth 2005).

To sum up, the US government carried the banner of media freedom and democracy and hailed the new regime that it brought to Iraq, but it worked in the opposite direction serving and protecting its own interests. In this regard, al-Qazwini affirms that the US authorities followed 'their own agenda, paying lip service to the concept of a proper public broadcasting system, while doing what they feel is good for the Coalition, not for the Iraqi people' (2004).

### The Establishment of IMN

As mentioned earlier, the CPA established the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) as was planned in the 'White Paper' project. However, very few Iraqis were involved in the planning process that went afterward mainly due to the deteriorating security condition.

As for the Iraqi Governing Council members who work from the fortified Green Zone, they were mostly busy with their 'own survival and succession' and lacked the motive and interest to discuss the future of Iraq's media (Price 2007, 15).

Originally, IMN was supposed to replace the Ministry of Information in order to become a public service media outlet like the BBC and PBS. In April 10, 2003 IMN's radio aired its first programs and in May 13, Al-Iraqia TV channel started broadcasting with the help of 350 Iraqis; some of them came with the US forces (Dauenhauer and Lobe 2003).

Indeed, IMN was manipulated and fully controlled from the beginning of its establishment by the CPA which used to dictate policies to be followed such as dropping 'the readings from the Koran' and the "'vox-pop" man-in-the-street interviews (usually critical of the US invasion)'. Censorship reached a level when Hiru Khan, the wife of the current Kurdish President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, was told to review the TV broadcast before airing it (Jayasekera 2003). The UK government also provided technical support, programs, and documentaries to help build IMN. Amongst its activities was its insistence to air a one-hour daily program called 'Toward Freedom' despite the objection of some IMN media staff (North 2003). Many IMN staff members felt disillusioned as a result of such overt interference. For instance, Don North worked for IMN for almost three months as a senior TV advisor and trainer. After leaving Iraq, he revealed how IMN became 'an irrelevant mouthpiece for Coalition Provisional Authority propaganda' due to its 'managed news and mediocre programs' (North 2003). IMN original goal was to be 'an information conduit'; instead, it became 'just rubber-stamp flacking for the C.P.A.' (Opel 2003) because US authorities could not 'resist controlling the message' (Democracy Now 2004). Furthermore, North claimed that the CPA made IMN a replica of the Voice of America, indirectly suggesting the influence of Reilly. As a result, IMN's credibility was destroyed because of CPA's 'incompetence and indifference' (Opel 2003). In his speech in the US Congress in February 2005, North revealed that several US officials stressed that 'we were running a public diplomacy operation' via IMN which was given a 'laundry list of CPA activities to cover' (Margasak, 2005).

Ahmed al-Rikabi who said the first words on Iraqi airwaves on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2003, sensed the grave task IMN had, saying: 'We have a big responsibility. If you put the wrong message out, do things without feeling responsibility, your program might lead

to civil war. You have to be careful, balanced' (McCaul 2003). Also, Jalal al-Mashta, who first worked as an editor in chief of Adnan al-Pachachi's newspaper, *al-Nahdha*, was nominated as IMN's head in May 2004, but he resigned after six months due to the lack of support and the CPA's influence over IMN (Haner 2004).

Due to the presence of a Shiite majority who were mostly aligned to political parties (Levinson 2006), al-Iraqia TV channel started to show signs of bias. Al-Rikabi pointed out that IMN one-sided policy would only lead the country toward anarchy: 'The people of Iraq, including the Sunni Muslims, are not about to turn against their liberators, but they are being incited to do so. These channels contribute to tension within Iraq. You need television at their level' (Oweis 2003). Salih al-Mutlaq, a Sunni politician, agrees with al-Rikabi and adds that beside the prevalent political reasons IMN has become 'another factor that is helping to turn Iraqi society into a sectarian society' (Levinson 2006).

The first step taken by al-Iraqia channel was broadcasting the Shiite call of prayer (Oweis 2003) and heavily covering the other Shiite sermons, flagellation events, and Friday prayer speeches, leaving the Arab Sunnis without a voice. But probably the worst decision taken was to publicly air the infamous Shiite insults against the Muslim Caliphs stating: 'may God curse the first, second and third' (*Wikileaks* 2006). Secondly, the channel started highlighting the atrocities of the former Baath regime by covering the crimes committed against the Shiites and Kurds in particular as if Arab Sunnis were not affected by Saddam Hussein's regime. For example, emphasis was always made on the mass graves in the mainly Shiite south, the 1991 Shiite uprising (Roug 2006), the Anfal campaign, and Halabja attack against the Kurds. Almost all the managers of al-Iraqia TV after dissolving the CPA on June 28 2004 were Shiites. In one of the shootouts between US forces and Shiite armed militias in 2006 where about 16 people were killed, al-Iraqia channel mentioned that 'unarmed worshippers' were murdered. 'Between interviews with Shiite politicians criticizing the Americans, the camera lingered on the dead and the grieving relatives' (Roug 2006). Yet, IMN and al-Iraqia channel rarely if never mention the 1995 and 1998 Sunni Arab revolts by the Dulaimi tribe in Anbar region, the execution of senior Sunni Baath Party members in 1979, and the arrest and execution of prominent Sunni religious clerics throughout the 1980s and 1990s.



Also, IMN began to air a controversial program called 'Terrorism in the Grip of Justice'. The programme involves interviews with 'terrorists' captured by US forces and Iraqi security personnel shown on TV to confess their crimes without being tried by a judge or legal court. The UK Telegraph.co.uk described the 'intelligence successes' in Iraq by citing this show (2005). There were clear signs of torture seen on the interviewees' faces who sometimes had difficulty talking. In addition, the majority of suspects shown are Sunni insurgents including some Arab fighters, but no Shiite militiamen from the Death Squads, Mahdi Army or Badr Brigade were interviewed though many were involved in sectarian killings and kidnappings. The program, which was aired at 9 pm, Iraq's television prime time, presented recurrent themes involving the implication of Al-Jazeera channel as a source of inspiration for those 'terrorists' in conducting their acts or the accusation of Syrian intelligence to be behind the insurgency in Iraq (Stalinsky 2005). There is no coincidence that these two themes were also what the US authorities used to cite to explain the source of violence in the country (Murphy and Saffar 2005, A18). In other words, there was an indication that most of these televised confessions were actually orchestrated to serve US and Iraqi official stances. Further, 'Terrorism in the Grip of Justice' was hailed by some Iraqi Shiite politician as evidence that the Interior Ministry headed by the infamous Islamic Supreme Council's senior member, Bayan Jabr Solagh, was able to perform its duties.

It is important to note here that the CPA is complicit with the Iraqi Media Network's effort to create tension and schism between Sunnis and Shiites. Both shared the same rhetoric though IMN would sometimes go a step further. To give few examples, if the US Army captures a number of suspects from Sunni regions like Anbar, Mosul, or Salahideen, IMN would mention that a number of 'terrorists' were arrested. Even the term 'occupation' that was used by the US forces themselves to define their presence in Iraq was not used by IMN; instead, the term 'liberation' became the frequent expression. Other incidents like the Abu Ghraib scandal, the assaults on Falluja city and the high amount of radiation left, the rape of the 14- year old Abeer al-Jinabi and the slaying of her family in a Sunni area received scant if no coverage by IMN. In fact, airing any kind of criticism against the Iraqi and US authorities is not part of IMN's policy. Hence, IMN staff were looked upon by many Iraqis as agents and collaborators for the US and Iraqi

governments. This fact probably explains why IMN employees suffered around twenty casualties which is the highest number of Iraqi journalists killed among all the other media outlets operating in the country since 2003 (Reporters Sans Frontières 2010, 7). The government appointed editor-in-chief of *Al-Sabah* newspaper, Mohammed Shaboot, commented in 2006 on al-Iraqia channel, saying: ‘It was supposed to be fair, and address all the people of Iraq, but so far it hasn't succeeded in achieving this unique goal.....No one has invested in a real, nationwide Iraqi channel for all Iraqis’ (Roug 2006). Indeed, the CPA allowed IMN to function freely though it knew about its biased and subjective coverage simply because it served its interests by covering and praising its activities. In short, the CPA planned to have an IMN that is independent and free from any political group; unfortunately the plan was destined to fail from the beginning because it stayed on paper and was never put into real action.

### The New Iraqi Media Scene

The US-led invasion and its aftermath brought with it new freedom of expressions and some other benefits for Iraqi journalists such as the interaction with international media organizations and western journalists and the salary scale improvement. However, censorship remained a fundamental issue since the majority of journalists still practice self-censorship. For example, it is ‘unthinkable’ to criticize political or religious leaders like Muqtada Sadr or Nouri al-Maliki (Kim and Hama-Saeed 2008, 588) or the grand four Shiite Ayatollahs in Najaf. On the other hand, for ordinary Sunni Arabs who have no armed protection, it is also ‘unthinkable’ to criticize al-Qaeda or Iraqi insurgent groups because of the repercussions involved and similar media restrictions are found in Iraqi Kurdistan (see for example Associated Press 2010). Other ways of silencing journalists are libel suits or the threat of filing them; this is usually practiced by senior Iraqi officials like al-Maliki, Talabani, and Barazani.

The division in the Iraqi media along sectarian lines is still very apparent to this day. As a recent example is the case of Laith Al-Dulaimi, a former member in Baghdad Governorate Council, who was arrested and charged with terrorism. Al-Dulaimi is a Sunni member of Al-Araqiya political bloc which is in opposition to Al-Maliki’s Shiite

led government. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2012, the Iraqi Interior Ministry held a press conference and paraded Al-Dulaimi together with other alleged Al-Qaeda members and promised to show their confessions; however, Al-Dulaimi stood up and swore that the whole case was fabricated and started crying and begging for mercy to avoid torture in prison. Interestingly, Iraqi media channels framed what happened based on their religious and political affiliations. For example, the Shiite channels such as Al-Ahad TV, Al-Maliki's Afaq TV, and Al-Masar TV accused Al-Dulaimi of being a terrorist and that he staged a clever performance to convince the people of his innocence, while Sunni channels like Baghdad TV and Al-Rafidain TV were very sympathetic toward Al-Dulami and harshly criticized the government for allowing torture to be conducted in prisons for political gains. As for the state-run Al-Iraqia TV, it only communicated the Iraqi government's official message which incriminated Al-Dulaimi. Having the agenda setting theory and the role of ideology in shaping media messages in mind, the unfortunate conclusion reached is that Iraqi television viewer is mostly limited to knowing one version of reality that is solely linked to his preferred channel and its ideological nature.

To sum up, the US political design to shape Iraq as a democracy had catastrophic consequences on the political and social levels which will remain apparent for decades to come. The new ethno-sectarian Iraqi media, an extension of this new political reality, has played a major role in enhancing the division in the Iraqi society. In their book, *Erasing Iraq* (2010) Otterman, Hil, and Wilson call the change that occurred to the Iraqi society after the occupation due to forced displacement and targeted violence as a sociocide. This is, unfortunately, part of the US pragmatic policy that also entails a misreading of Iraq's history and society and miscalculation of the potential damage of sectarianism. Though today's sectarian violence in the country has dramatically decreased, and the Iraqi media rhetoric has slightly improved, there is still a physical and social rift, for the city of Baghdad and other strategic regions have become divided into Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods mostly separated by concrete walls. Socially, intermarriages between Sunnis and Shiites have become a rare event. Indeed, the wounds inflicted during the sectarian tension need a great deal of time to heal, but first Iraqi media outlets must address Iraqis as a whole and seek independence from their sponsors before a positive

change occurs.

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