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The Post-Saddam Iraqi Media: Reporting the Democratic Developments of 2005

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Abstract

The toppling of Saddam in 2003 brought with it the re-emergence of the free press in Iraq. This has seen Iraq shift from only a handful of state media outlets that served as propaganda machines, to a vast array of Iraqi-owned newspapers, radio stations and television channels which are being fervently produced and avidly consumed across the nation. This paper therefore reviews the developments in Iraq's post-Saddam media sector and finds that it has been central to the return of an Iraqi public sphere which has openly debated and discussed the issues surrounding the nation's shift from despotism to democracy. This is perhaps best evidenced by the role that the Iraqi media played in hosting a rich tapestry of debate, discourse and deliberation from a panoply of political, religious and ethno-sectarian factions throughout the elections and the referendum held across the nation in 2005. Despite their respective biases and particular persuasions, the net effect of such a rich media sector has been an Iraqi populace who are both concerned and informed about the nuances of democratic governance.

Introduction¹

Traditionally, the news media of the Middle East has served as the faithful propaganda machine of the elite. Most governments across the region operate their own print and broadcast services, recognizing the power the media holds in legitimizing and stabilizing their authority. There are, of course, a number of non-governmental news outlets that operate. However, such independent media are, in most instances, expected to toe the line for fear of harassment, fines, imprisonment, torture, and even death. At the very least, they are required to obtain a license from the relevant authorities; a license which can be refused or revoked for any number of charges, thereby rendering the outlet illegal (Whitaker, 2003). In addition, most Arab nations have restrictive press and publications laws such as Saudi Arabia's Fundamental Law (Article 39) which requires that "The media and publishing houses, as well as other forms of expression, must respect the words and Laws of the State... Publication of anything that might lead to internal rifts or struggle, or that might harm state security or foreign relations, is forbidden in accordance with the law" (as cited in: Street, 2001: 250).

However, developments in communications technologies during the twentieth century brought with them vast changes in the relationship between the citizen, the state and the media across the region. Starting with the Arabic version of the *BBC World Service* in 1932 and followed by other Western radio stations such as the *Voice of America* and *Radio Monte Carlo Moyen-Orient* many Arabs were able to quench their thirst "...for objective information and diverse analyses and viewpoints on the issues facing their societies" (Ghareeb, 2000: 400). Similarly, the Pan-Arab press, many of which have been published in London for more than 30 years, continue to enjoy strong readership across the region. Although at times they can be seen to support the interests and agendas of their owners (for example, many are financially backed by the Saudi government), when compared to the tightly controlled domestic media of most Arab nations they offer their readers a refreshing voice of objectivity and critique (Ghareeb, 2000: 412-414; Rugh, 2004: 167-180). Other technologies, such as

the audio-cassette, have proven effective in spreading messages of dissent to a largely illiterate population. For example, during the late 1970s in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers effectively utilized this technology by recording his sermons over the phone from his exile in Paris and then distributing the contraband audio tapes across the nation (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994).

Today, the satellite dishes that are ubiquitous across the rooftops of most of the Arab region have brought the world into the living rooms of the Middle East. The general Middle Eastern dissatisfaction with Western and government controlled satellite stations and their coverage of major regional events such as the Gulf War of 1991 led many to question why there were no Arab alternatives to channels such as the *Cable News Network* (CNN) (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1998: 188). The post-Gulf War economic boom thus brought with it the development of stations such as the *Arab News Network*, *Abu Dhabi TV*, the recently launched *Al-Arabiya* ("The Arabian") and, of course, *Al-Jazeera* ('The Peninsula'). Indeed, so popular are these satellite channels that they have begun to have an impact on both the political elite of the region and their state-funded media, "...thus helping to broaden the limitations on debate and to enhance the level of authentic democratic exchange" (Ghareeb, 2000: 417). Indeed, in Mohammad El-Nawawy and Adel Iskander's seminal study on *Al-Jazeera*, they cite Qatari media scholar Ali Al-Hail, who claims that media outlets such as *Al-Jazeera* "...are the best way to reinvigorate a sense of freedom, democratization, and liberty throughout the Arab world, in addition to fostering a vibrant civil society" (Al-Hail as cited in: El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2002: 28). However, satellite television has not only brought news to the Middle East, it has also brought with it Arab-versions of popular Western Reality TV programs such as *Super Star* and *Star Academy* (the Arab versions of *Pop Idol*, *American/Australian Idol* or *Fame Academy*) and *Al-Ra'is* (*Big Brother*). These programs have been so popular across the region that a series of authors in a recent issue of *Translational Broadcasting Studies* have addressed the issue of whether or not Reality TV is the best hope for democratization in the Middle East (Harris & Uthmna, 2005; Khalil, 2005; Kraidy, 2005; Lynch, 2005; Wise, 2005). Here Marwan Kraidy has argued that "The political implications of transnational Arab Reality television rest to a large extent in the way that it draws out into the public sphere competing arguments about politics, economics, culture, religion and the myriad interconnections between the four" (Kraidy, 2005).

Likewise the Internet and its impacts on the Middle East have been investigated by a large number of academics from a variety of disciplines. Like much of the developing world, the vast majority of the Middle East sadly lies on the wrong side of the "Digital Divide": the technological infrastructure is limited, few can afford a computer let alone regular access to the internet, few are able to read the now global language of English, and in many countries the government continues to tightly monitor access to certain sites (Friedlander, 2000: 152-155; Ghareeb, 2000: 415; Seib, 2004/2005: 81-82). However, with the development of software that has enabled standard computers to produce Arabic script (Gonzalez-Quijano, 2003: 62), the internet has begun to serve as a forum for pertinent issues facing the Arab world, such as questions of religion (Anderson, 2003), women's role in society (Skalli, 2006) and calls for democratization (Cunningham, 2002; Teitelbaum, 2002; Wheeler, 2001).

Collectively, this spectrum of media outlets and technologies, from the Pan-Arab press to the Internet and from the audio-cassette to Reality TV, has had a tremendous impact on the societies of the Middle East. Firstly, as Edmund Ghareeb points out, they have led to a cross-border, pan-Arab discourse where citizens, from Marrakech to Muscat, are imbued with a sense of collective cultural unity and the notion of a common Arab agenda (Ghareeb, 2000: 416-418). This, combined with the exposure to the rest of the world has led to a more informed, and arguably more critical, Middle Easterner who is interested in partaking in the processes of egalitarian governance. Here Marc Lynch has succinctly stated that

Rather than imposing a single, overwhelming consensus, the new satellite television stations, along with newspapers, Internet sites, and many other sites of public communication, challenged Arabs to argue, to disagree, and to question the status quo. These public arguments, passionate in their invocation of an aggrieved Arab identity, sometimes oppressively conformist

and sometimes bitterly divisive, sensationalist but liberating, defined a new kind of Arab public and new kind of Arab politics. (Lynch, 2006: 2)

However, despite this wealth of research on the impact that recent Middle Eastern media developments have had on the region's public sphere, there has been little investigation into the emergence of this "new kind of Arab public and new kind of Arab politics" in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam in 2003 and the corresponding end to his tight control over the nation's media sector. This paper therefore begins by providing a brief overview of the post-Saddam media landscape which has seen Iraq shift from having only a handful of state-run media outlets that served as propaganda machines, to a diverse media landscape made up of an impressive number of Iraqi-owned and controlled newspapers, television channels and radio stations which are being fervently produced and avidly consumed across the nation. These divergent and ad-hoc media outlets speak for all shades of opinion and represent not only the interests of the key ethno-religious and political factions which are vying for power, but also provide a voice to many of the smaller minorities that have long been disenfranchised by the central government in Baghdad.

The net effect of this lively media landscape is that it appears to have brought about the re-emergence of a participatory and engaged public sphere in Iraq, a step which is fundamental to the formation of a stable and democratic government. Specifically, this paper examines the role that the Iraqi media played during the series of elections and the referendum that occurred throughout Iraq in 2005, where the myriad voices not only encouraged Iraqis to vote but combined to provide a rich array of debate and information on key policies, politicians and parties in the lead-up to the elections.

The Post-Saddam Iraqi Media: A Brief Overview

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

The vast majority of Iraq's new television stations, radio stations and newspapers were started by the seemingly countless political parties, religious factions and/or ethno-sectarian groups of post-Saddam Iraq, each of which is jostling for support and legitimacy in the nation's struggle from despotism to democracy (Cochrane, 2006; Ghazi, 2006; "The press in

Iraq, ” 2007). Here, the domestic politics of Iraq are convoluted by the vast number of religious and ethnic divides that do not neatly dissect the nation into a series of mutually exclusive groups. There are, as is now commonly known, three large ethno-religious groups in Iraq, the Shi'a Arabs, the Kurds and the Sunni Arabs as well as a number of smaller “...racial and religious minorities... [including] Turkomans, Persians, Assyrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Jews, Yazidihs, Sabeans, and others” (Batatu, 1982 [1978]: 13). Within each of these broad categories are more intricate differences, with each sector capable of being further broken down by religious sects, varying ethnicities and cultural groups as well as political sub-categories. Given the long and complex political history of each of these groups, it is not at all surprising that the freeing up of the Iraqi media sector following the coalition invasion witnessed the arrival of a highly partisan media, geared towards the stated policies and agendas of Iraq's divergent ethno-religious and political scene (Harmston, 2003). As Ibrahim Al-Marashi points out, the Iraqi media sector has witnessed the rise of various ethno-sectarian “...media empires” which have evolved into “...quite a pervasive element in Iraq's Fourth Estate” (Al-Marashi, 2007: 104).

Perhaps foremost among these groups are the Kurdish people of northern Iraq who have fostered a significantly diverse and free press since the Gulf War of 1991. Nonetheless, the fall of Saddam has brought with it a credible expansion of the media controlled by Iraqi Kurdistan's two main political factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP – currently led by Massoud Barzani) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, currently led by the incumbent President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani) as well as smaller Kurdish political parties such as the Communist party of Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Toilers Party, and the Action Party for the Independence of Kurdistan among others. In addition, the Kurdish media landscape also includes a variety of well regarded independent organs which have played an active role in reporting on the Kurdistan Regional Government of post-Saddam Iraq, including those that deal exclusively with women's issues.

Despite the fact they have always been the majority in modern Iraq, the Shi'a have long been marginalized by the central Sunni-led government and therefore produced a number of active oppositional movements. The two main Shi'ite political groups are the Da'wah party (currently led by former Iraqi Prime Minister, Ibrahim Al-Jaafari) and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, currently led by Sayyid Abd Al-Aziz Al-Hakim after his brother and former leader, Ayatollah Mohammad Bakr Al-Hakim was assassinated in Najaf in 2003), both of which control several media outlets that promote their respective ideology and agenda. Likewise, smaller media empires are controlled by the loyal followers of Moqtada Al-Sadr, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, members of Iraqi Hizbullah, the Supreme Council for the Liberation of Iraq (SCLI), the Islamic Action Organisation and Ayatollah Hadi Al Moderassi. In addition the predominately Shi'ite south of Iraq is also home to several significant regional television and radio stations and a handful of independent newspapers, the political persuasions of which remain unclear.

The Sunni Arab population of Iraq (who ruled the nation since its creation in the 1920s until the fall of Saddam, but only ever constituted approximately 20% of Iraq's diverse population) entered both the political and media landscape of post-Saddam Iraq at a relatively late stage. Today, however, Iraq is home to several Sunni political parties including the Iraqi Islamic Party as well as the Unified National Movement, the general Dialogue Conference and the Association of Muslim Scholars, all of which amalgamated to form the Al-Tawafuq Front (“The Accordance Front”) in 2005 in order to contest the December elections (Al-Marashi, 2007: 111). While each of the separate Sunni parties controls its own media outlets, it is those controlled by their coalition, the Al-Tawafuq Front, which has proven the most effective if somewhat controversial. In addition, several of Iraq's smaller ethno-religious minorities, such as the Turkomans, the Assyrians and the Faili Kurds (Shi'ite Kurds) have managed to produce several effective media outlets.

Beyond these ethno-religious groupings and their political parties / media outlets, are those which do not officially hold such allegiances and claim to be both secular and inclusive. Among the more influential of these is the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Workers Communist Party of Iraq. In addition to these communist parties are two of Iraq's more

influential opposition movements, Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord (INA) and Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress (INC), both of which had the experience and the funding to freely publish and distribute their organs in the new Iraq. In the initial media frenzy of post-Saddam Iraq, a number of these smaller political parties produced relatively insignificant newspapers which either folded along with their respective party or were left by the wayside as the party amalgamated into one of the more prominent factions.

These publications have been joined by those which claim to be free of any specific political, religious or sectarian allegiance and desire to report the news in a professional and objective manner. While objectivity and independence are difficult issues even for the best regarded "Western" media outlets, there is an impressive array of Iraqi media which at the very least attempts to uphold the kind of standards epitomized by a free press, even if occasional and subtle biases can be detected. In addition, Iraq has also seen the production of publications sponsored by various journalist collectives and publishing houses, several sports bulletins, arts and culture magazines, a few industry related organs, several children's and student magazines, comedic publications containing sharp political satire and still others which resemble the tawdry British tabloids, detailing local and international gossip and entertainment news as well as featuring pictures of scantily clad women (for comprehensive lists, see: "Iraqi Media," 2003; "Iraqi Media: Online Newspapers," 2003; "The New Iraqi Press," 2003).

The Post-Saddam Iraqi Media: The Public Sphere and Democratization

Despite Iraq's divergent, ad-hoc and highly volatile media landscape, there have only been a handful of scholarly studies which have attempted to document and analyze the role that such media have played in the complex matrix of post-Saddam politics (Abedin, 2006; Al-Deen, 2005; Al-Marashi, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Barker, 2008; Cochrane, 2006; Isakhan, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007). Here Paul Cochrane argues in an issue of *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* that such developments represent what he calls the "Lebanonization" of the Iraqi media in reference to the myriad ethno-sectarian media outlets that co-exist in Lebanon's complex media and political sphere (Cochrane, 2006). Others have focused their attention on the funding of various Iraqi organs by US organizations such as the *National Endowment for Democracy* (Barker, 2008) and the interference in Iraq's media landscape exerted by various foreign (Iran, Saudi Arabia and the US) and domestic (the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional authority) powers (Isakhan, 2008a).

However, perhaps more disconcerting is the fact that, as of 2006, a series of policy papers and newspaper reports began to argue that Iraq's complex and highly partisan media landscape may actually serve to enhance the ethno-sectarian lines which gauche divide Iraqi society (Abedin, 2006; Al-Marashi, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Ghazi, 2006; Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007; Metcalf, 2006; Roug, 2006). Foremost among these is a series of papers by Ibrahim Al-Marashi in which he warns that such media diversity may well be "...providing the psychological groundwork for bitter divisiveness and conflict" (Al-Marashi, 2007: 99), the kind which preceded the media inspired genocide found in Rwanda of the 1990s (Al-Marashi, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). This is evidenced, according to Al-Marashi, by the ethno-sectarian feuds that occurred in the wake of the bombing of the revered Shi'a Al-Askari mosque in Samarra in February 2006 (Al-Marashi, 2007: 97, 100). Here, the various ethno-sectarian media of Iraq, such as the pro-Sunni *Baghdad* satellite channel and pro-Shi'a/Iraqi government television stations such as *Al-Furat* ("The Euphrates") and *Al-Iraqiya* ("The Iraqi"), are alleged to have escalated tensions following the bombing, but eventually called for restraint (Al-Marashi, 2007: 125; Cochrane, 2006; Roug, 2006).

Beyond the coverage of the Al-Askari bombing, much of the impetus for Al-Marashi's argument lies in the content aired by the controversial satellite channel, *Al-Zawra* ("The Curved [City]" – a popular soubriquet for Baghdad). This station has regularly urged Iraqis to join the fight against the occupation and shows footage of successful insurgent attacks against US and Iraqi forces (Al-Marashi, 2007: 113-117), leading Al-Marashi to dub the station a "...platform for insurgents" (Al-Marashi, 2007: 113). It is the case of *Al-Zawra* that Al-Marashi believes "...represents a worse case scenario for the Iraqi media" and that it is entirely "...plausible that a channel owned by other political, ethno-sectarian factions, or

even an independent channel, could undergo a similar transformation” (Al-Marashi, 2007: 117). While such concerns are clearly legitimate and the greatest of care needs to be taken to make sure that Iraq does not descend into further sectarian violence, a civil war or genocide, there is a problem in focusing on very serious but relatively isolated examples such as *Al-Zawra* and their associated potential for mass disaster. The problem here is that such conclusions tend to ignore the overwhelmingly positive role that most of the Iraqi media – with all their inherent biases and blatant ideologies – have played in fostering the emergence of a renewed public sphere in Iraq. Indeed, the Iraqi media has been instrumental in serving the number of functions that a free press is expected to perform in the nascent democratic order that is post-Saddam Iraq.

This has occurred across many different genres, from traditionally political formats such as investigative journalism and talk radio programs to less ostensibly political genres such as soap operas, sketch comedy programs and even reality TV shows. Interestingly, the production and adaptation of these popular formats to suit an Iraqi audience has enabled the Iraqi media and its viewers to tackle “...issues of social injustice, government corruption and, on occasion, life under Hussein” (Sanders, 2005) in ways that they certainly would not have been able to under the former regime. It is not only clear that these formats serve an entertainment value, but they serve as something of a release valve, enabling the citizens to air their grievances on a call-in radio show, or laugh out loud at sketch comedy programs portraying the incompetence of various state officials. More to the point, such programs serve not only to reduce stress and tensions, but to provide alternative formats for public participation where any Iraqi with a television, a radio or a phone-line can engage with state politics and play a role in debating the key issues of the time.

Beyond these examples however, the Iraqi media has provided a considerably more serious voice in documenting and debating the series of elections and referendums that occurred across Iraq in 2005. In order to demonstrate this, the following draws on various academic journal articles, policy papers, and newspaper reports concerning the Iraqi media throughout 2005. In addition, this paper relies heavily on Iraqi media archives that were collated and translated into English by the *BBC's One Day in Iraq*, *RadioNetherland's Iraq Media Dossier* and especially that of the *United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq's (UNAMI) Iraqi Media Monitoring* (which were reproduced verbatim at globalsecurity.org). While it is important to acknowledge here that such sources cannot represent the entire spectrum of media coverage and debate present at the time of the elections and referendum of 2005, they nonetheless provide a valuable resource given the various issues, risks and costs associated with studying the post-Saddam Iraqi media.

Beginning as far back as February 2004, the nascent Iraqi media began to offer its views on the Iraqi Governing Council's (IGC) deliberations over a temporary constitution. In a plethora of opinion pieces and news articles across Iraq's divergent press, the nation's journalists were generally keen to discuss all manner of issues relating to the constitution, including attempts to avoid any reference to Islamic law in the wording of the document itself. Others deplored the IGC to avoid the temptation to skew the wording of the constitution in favor of their own interests, or those of their respective ethno-political group. For example one writer at the “independent” *Azzaman* (“The Times”) opined,

All those who have gathered around the conference table to discuss the draft interim constitution... would do well to rule out any possibility of coming up with anything tailored so as to be in full harmony with their own views. They are duty-bound to put aside the unworthy ploy of threatening to rouse the public into civil war in a bid to have their own ideas incorporated in the constitution. Any such practice would run counter to the reality of the political, ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity that is characteristic of Iraq. (Azzaman, as cited in: "Iraq concerns dominate media," 2004)

Following on from this, campaigning for the January 2005 election began on 15 December 2004 and almost immediately it had “...permeated every part of the Iraqi media, providing at least the show of a nascent democracy in action” (Usher, 2005b). Throughout the campaign

period, radio stations, newspapers and television channels played a critical role in not only promoting certain political parties and their stated ideologies and agenda, but also in simply encouraging Iraqis to defy the insurgent and terrorist threats and take part in the election.

For example, throughout the electoral campaign the German government funded a daily half-hour broadcast that covered various aspects of the election. They selected 25 young Iraqi journalists (all under the age of 30) and provided training for them in neighboring Jordan. These young journalists then returned to Iraq to seek out stories relating to the election which were broadcast on Iraqi stations such as the independent *Radio Dijla* ("Tigris"), and the KDP's *Voice of Iraqi Kurdistan*, as well as being available for download on the internet (RadioNetherland, 2005). Over the course of the campaign these short broadcasts included information vital to the functioning of free and fair elections including profiles of politicians, political parties and the various coalitions that emerged in post-Saddam Iraq as well as details of which parties were boycotting the elections, comment by foreign election observers and the cultural aspects of the campaign itself (Usher, 2004). In addition to these half-hour broadcasts *Radio Dijla* also ran its regular programming which encouraged Iraqis to phone-in and offer their opinion on the elections as well as quiz shows that posed questions such as: "Which is better, a preset democratic model or one that is in harmony with Iraq's culture?" (Usher, 2005b).

As is to be expected, Iraq's leading television stations, *Al-Iraqiya*, *Al-Sharqiya* ("The Eastern One") and *Al-Diyar* ("The Homeland"), led the domestic television market, screening campaign advertisements ranging from the techno-savvy efforts of groups such as Allawi's Iraqi List and the coalition of Shi'a groups known as the United Iraqi Alliance, through to the hackneyed efforts of the smaller parties (Usher, 2005b). In addition, all three of these channels worked in the public interest, disseminating information regarding the curfews, restrictions and security measures that had been placed across the nation in the lead up to the election (UNAMI, 2005l, 2005m, 2005o, 2005p, 2005q). More specifically, *Al-Iraqiya* undertook an extensive campaign to counter the threats made against those who participated in the election by Iraq's varied terrorist and insurgent groups, which included airing statements by Iraq's religious leaders urging Iraqis to partake in the upcoming elections (Misterek, 2005; UNAMI, 2005j). Providing the kind of access to the political elite rarely seen in even the most highly esteemed "Western" media, *Al-Iraqiya* also broadcast a weekly phone-in program hosted by the incumbent Iraqi Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, who patiently answered unscreened calls from Iraqis keen to discuss various issues with their leader and air their frustrations (Usher, 2005b). Allawi was also interviewed several times on both *Al-Sharqiya* (UNAMI, 2005o) and *Al-Diyar* where, on the latter, the Prime Minister is reported to have stated that "...the fate of democracy in Iraq depended on the Iraqi people's participation in the election" (Allawi, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005c).

As the election drew closer, Iraq's media dedicated more and more time and energy to covering the election, screening interviews, conducting press conferences, airing debates and encouraging phone-ins from an increasingly wide range of political parties, candidates and even ordinary citizens. Throughout this period, Iraq's print media sector played an increasingly important role in raising and discussing several key issues related to the forthcoming elections. For example, in the lead up to the elections, the "independent" *Al-Dustour* ("The Constitution") published a collection of articles including those critical of the incumbent Iraqi government (UNAMI, 2005d), those which provided details of some of Iraq's various smaller political factions (UNAMI, 2005e), those which countered rumors about the election (UNAMI, 2005g), those which discussed the thorny issue of religion and politics (UNAMI, 2005o), and those which called for peace and unity (UNAMI, 2005p). On the issue of whether or not the elections should be postponed, virtually the entire range of views and opinions were expressed in papers as diverse as "independent" organs like *Azzaman*, the Iraq National Congress' *Al-Mutamar* ("The Congress"), Iraqi Hezbollah's *Al-Bayyah* ("The Evidence") and the Da'wah parties *Al-Da'wah* ("The Calling") and *Al-Bayyan* ("The Dispatch") (UNAMI, 2005d, 2005e, 2005k, 2005l). Meanwhile, Kurdish papers such as the "independent" *Hawlati* ("Citizen"), the PUK's *Kurdistani Nuwe* ("New Kurdistan") and the KDP's *Xebat* ("Struggle"), ran a collection of stories both before and after the elections that detailed the various Kurdish concerns and developments in the lead up to the election, such

as the issue of federation, Kurdish regional elections, unity among the many different people of Kurdistan and the future status of Kirkuk (UNAMI, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005e, 2005j, 2005o, 2005p, 2005r).

The Iraqi press also fostered a lively and diverse discussion on the merits and tenets of democracy. For example, various Shi'a backed organs, such as Daw'ah's *Al-Bayan* and SCIRI's *Al-Adala* ("The Justice") were somewhat unrestrained in their optimism. Throughout these articles, the Shia papers are adamant that all of the Iraqi people are entitled to vote and that they must "...not miss this great opportunity" (*Al-Bayan*, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005c) to "...pave the way for the rise of the rule of law, in which democracy, freedom, security, and sovereignty will prevail" (*Al-Adala*, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005p). As if to capture this enthusiasm and summarise these sentiments, an editorial which appeared just days before the election in *Al-Bayan* stated:

The countdown has begun for a great, historic day in the life of our people. On this day, the people will master their own destiny and future when they will select their representatives to the constitutional assembly that will draft the permanent constitution and choose an elected government expressing their will and working to achieve their hopes and aspirations. The responsibility for making this election a success does not rest only with the government or the electoral commission that will supervise and ensure a fair vote. Rather, it depends, above all, on our people through their broad participation, with all their sects, ethnic groups, political forces and social categories. We believe the high turnout will be the most telling response to the terrorists and killers who seek to confiscate Iraqi people's will. With it, they will tell those terrorist they are much more stronger than their criminal means. (*Al-Bayan*, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005s)

Similar sentiments can be found across the pages of the INC's *Al-Mutamar*, where writers such as Shaykh Ali Abd-Al-Husayn Kammunah implored the citizens of Iraq to take part in the "...great democratic process for which we have waited long and offered dear sacrifices" (Kammunah, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005g), while Nabil Al-Qassab argued that the election would foster Iraqi unity and "...guarantee the rights of all sects, ethnic groups, and nationalities" (Al-Qassab, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005s). Indeed, *Al-Mutamar* was such a strong advocate of the elections that it appeared to view them as something of a "silver bullet", capable of rectifying each of Iraq's complex problems. Consider, for example, the words of Salman Al-Shammari who, in an article entitled "Iraqi elections a positive step of democracy" wrote that:

not only are the Iraqi elections a positive step on the path leading to shortening the occupation's life and solving the political problem in Iraq and a positive and good initiative to boost and deepen the principles of democracy, plurality, and rule of law in the country, but they are also the key and main way to get rid of the security and economic crises that Iraq suffers from. (Al-Shammari, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005p)

The independent press of Iraq seemed to largely follow suite. For example, much of the coverage in *Al-Dustour* emphasized the need for national unity, with Ibrahim Zaydan opining that "In order to build a pluralist, democratic Iraq, as we hope, we have to open the doors for participation to everybody because Iraq is home to all Iraqis, rather than to a particular sect, ethnic group, tribe or religion" (Zaydan, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005g). This was echoed to some degree by Basim Al-Shaykh who claimed that Iraq needed to "...seeks God's help and rise up as one man with their hands united to place the voting card deciding their destiny in the ballot box holding their aspirations for tomorrow" (Shaykh, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005i). However, *Al-Dustour's* coverage also came with a stern warning to those who would manipulate the Iraqi elections or the broader body politic to their own devices. "Let it be known from now on" begins another piece by Al-Shaykh,

that the average Iraqi will tolerate no mandate other than that dictated by his own conscience. Advocates of fake heavenly agendas had better steer away from Iraq and Iraqis, for we have had enough at the hands of opportunists touting bright religious and nationalist slogans. Let them seek their fortune elsewhere, for we have made a solemn vow to root out anyone stalking our beloved Iraq, regardless of their race or colour and no matter how dazzlingly bright their banners may be. (Shaykh, as cited in: UNAMI, 2005e)

In terms of the watch-dog function of the media, the well-respected independent Kurdish newspaper *Hawlati* took the unrivalled step of publishing the list of candidates on the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan in the lead up to the election itself. What makes *Hawlati*'s move significant is not only that no other media had published such a list due to security concerns for the candidates, but also the paper revealed that about a dozen Kurdish candidates were former Ba'athists (Glantz, 2005). This brought with it a storm of controversy as members of the Ba'ath were not only excluded by law from playing a part in contemporary Iraqi politics, but also because the deposed party had been responsible for various atrocities inflicted on the Kurdish people such as the Anfal campaign of the 1980s. Other newspapers waited until after the election to raise their concerns. For example, in mid-February 2005 Iraq's *Azzaman* published an unofficial list of the candidates elected to the Iraqi National Assembly following the January elections while several other newspapers, including the Da'wah party's *Al-Bayan*, SCIRI's *Al-Adala* and the INC's *Al-Mutamar* continued to publish their concerns on the make-up of the post-election assembly (UNAMI, 2005n). However, Iraq's highbrow "independent" paper *Al-Mada* ("The View") alleged that the Iraqi Council of Commissioners had pre-defined the number of seats and percentages for political entities which would go on to form the National Assembly following the election (UNAMI, 2005n).

Immediately following the election itself, the diverse landscape that is the post-Saddam Iraqi media expressed a virtually unified praise for the conduct of the elections and their significance for the future of the nation. Indeed, the jubilation of many Iraqi journalists splashed across the pages of newspapers as diverse as Da'wah's *Al-Bayan*, Iraqi Hezbollah's *Al-Bayyah*, the INA's *Baghdad*, the INC's *Al-Mutamar* as well as "independent" organs such as *Al-Mada* and *Azzaman* (UNAMI, 2005b, 2005f, 2005h, 2005i, 2005t). As just one example, *Al-Bayan* printed the following comment on the election,

It was a historic day in the life of our people. On this day, Iraqis taught the peoples of the region a great lesson in democracy. The first winner and victor in these elections is, beyond any doubt, the Iraqi people. This, in itself, is quite enough for all those who contributed to writing this national epic to feel proud. It is, indeed, a remarkable feat added to Iraqi civilization records. (Al-Bayan as cited in: UNAMI, 2005b)

This optimism was to continue in the Iraqi media following the referendum which effectively ratified the Iraqi Constitution in October 2005. Not only did the Iraqi media (across its rich array of formats and persuasions) play a critical role in disseminating the draft constitution in the lead-up to the referendum, television stations such as *Al-Sharqiya* hosted a phone-in program to discuss the finer details of the document ("One Day in Iraq: Media and comment," 2005). In addition, one of Iraq's more influential Islamist papers, the SCIRI-backed *Al-Adala*, featured one editorial which lauded the constitution, stating

The fact that cannot be denied or concealed is that Iraqis have defeated their enemies: terrorists, dark forces and those who dream of a return of the unfair equation. What has been achieved for Iraq would not have seen the light of day had it not been for the sacrifices by Iraqis and their friends. The time of coercion and pressure has gone for good, and the time of freedom and democracy has come. Democracy and freedom have been created in Iraq by all the honourable men in the world who have stood by Iraq in its ordeal, offering all that is dear to them. (Al-Adala, as cited in: "Press sees hope after Iraq vote," 2005)

In December 2005, as Iraqis prepared to nominate a permanent government, Iraq's media landscape once again buzzed with the excitement of the looming election. Newspapers across Iraq were awash with political advertising and long articles detailed the complexity of Iraq's various political coalitions as well as providing details of polling stations and on how to vote. The streets of the nation came alive with colorful billboards and posters pronouncing the intentions and policies of various groups, from secular parties to religious fundamentalists. On the airwaves, Iraqis could tune in to any number of radio programmes discussing the finer details of Iraq's political landscape and encouraging citizens to phone-in with their comments or questions. Even mobile phones were vulnerable as political text messages pinged their way into the pockets of many Iraqis (Usher, 2005a). Once again however, it was the television stations of the nation that best represented the rich array of political factions and competing parties, many even taking the unprecedented move to offer free political advertising. This brought with it a series of non-partisan and well-produced, if rather emotive, short films which encouraged Iraqis to vote. Less emotive were the government-funded advertisements which also gave details of how to vote as well as the location of polling booths (Usher, 2005a). In addition, the free air-time meant that many of Iraq's smaller minorities and political factions were able to broadcast their own amateur advertisements, although they did complain that they were not given equal air-time and were simply unable to compete with the larger parties and coalitions (Usher, 2005a). Despite such complaints, the fact that every legitimate political party in Iraq had access to free air-time on the nation's state-run television channel indicates the degree to which the Iraqi media served as a locus where the general public had ready access to a diverse range of political opinion, policy and debate. This is a fundamental shift from the media landscape of Ba'athist Iraq and a crucial step in the development of the media's role in providing the kind of information necessary for free and fair elections and, therefore, in underpinning the nation's move from despotism to democracy.

This free advertising aside, most of Iraq's TV stations took a decidedly biased stance in the lead up to the elections. For example, *Al-Sharqiya*, which had previously been lauded for its professional and objective reporting, joined with *Al-Iraqiya* in its unwavering support for the incumbent government of Iyad Allawi and his ministers, repeatedly airing his arty black-and-white commercials (Al-Marashi, 2007: 109; Usher, 2005a). The Shi'a-backed *Al-Furat* on the other hand, revealed its deeply partisan nature by refusing to offer free air time or screen paid advertisements from political parties other than the United Iraqi Alliance (which was a reincarnation of the January 2005 Unified Iraqi Coalition) (Al-Marashi, 2007: 109; Usher, 2005a). Fortunately, the Sunni parties also managed to have a voice in the December elections via their newly established *Baghdad* satellite channel. Having suffered the consequences of boycotting the January election, many of the various Sunni political movements formed the Al-Tawafuq Front in 2005 and quickly set about establishing the channel. In a bid to counter the clearly partisan nature of their rival stations, *Baghdad* only featured advertisements for the Al-Tawafuq Front in the lead up to the December election (Al-Marashi, 2007: 111).

Taken in isolation from each other, each of these respective media outlets can be seen to have clearly partisan tendencies that preclude them from the kind of balanced and politically neutral reporting that the media is supposed to provide in a democracy. However, a discerning Iraqi media consumer was provided with the full gamut of political coverage. Indeed, the Iraqi citizen who was prepared to switch between the various partisan newspapers, radio stations or television channels arguably received a relatively well-rounded picture of the elections. They were not only encouraged to vote or to phone-in and discuss the various issues at stake; they were also treated to a rich tapestry of debate, discourse and deliberations that occurred across a myriad of media outlets. It seems highly unlikely that any single Iraqi citizen, no matter how loyal towards his or her own ethno-political or religious faction, had *no* exposure to the multitude of other voices and concerns expressed throughout the campaigns. Iraq is not a neatly divided society where specific groups live in complete isolation from one another and even if it were, every Iraqi would have the opportunity to read a Kurdish newspaper, tune in to a minority radio station, or watch a pro-government, independent, pro-Sunni or pro-Shi'a TV station.

Conclusion

It can be argued that despite the fact that the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US-led "Coalition of the Willing" was an erroneous, egregious and illegitimate act, it did see the toppling and later execution of one of the twentieth century's most brutal tyrants, Saddam Hussein. This afforded an unrivalled upsurge in media freedoms across the nation, resulting in a shift from five tightly controlled propaganda organs to around 200 Iraqi-owned news publications by the end of that year, not to mention the concurrent expansion of Iraq's radio and television stations. Much of this new Iraqi media maintained a high level of objectivity and journalistic integrity, revelling in its newfound freedom to practice the profession and to connect with a population thirsty for undoctored news. Other outlets were understandably biased to particular segments of Iraq's population, toeing certain agendas and proliferating particular ideologies.

However, despite this problem, there is still reason to be optimistic about the role that Iraq's thriving media environ can play as the Fourth Estate in the resurrection of Iraq's public sphere. Firstly, Saddam's tight control over the media sector has left a population that is savvy to the intricacies of propaganda and capable of navigating suspicious content. This media literacy, coupled with the many independent Iraqi papers publishing freely across the nation are not only crucial in re-establishing a participatory and engaged public sphere, but can also help to abate the many conflicts across Iraq and thereby aid the shift towards a free, egalitarian and democratic nation. Secondly, Iraq's media can be seen to have played a central role in promoting the succession of Iraqi elections and referendums held throughout 2005. This is evidenced by the millions of Iraqi citizens who, despite threats of further violence, lined the streets of the nation for their chance to take part in the first truly democratic elections held in the nation for many decades. Specifically, the many partisan and non-partisan organs across Iraq in the lead up to these elections fulfilled their duty of informing the populus as to the central issues facing the nation and the stance taken by the numerous political parties emerging across Iraq. This resurgence of the Iraqi citizenry playing an active role in their governance as well as their engagement with a free press is crucial to the development of an informed and active public sphere.

With the next round of Iraqi elections scheduled for 2009, much therefore rests on the shoulders of Iraq's newly re-activated media sector. The ability of Iraq's press to both accurately report on the events and struggles of modern Iraq as well as to serve as the locus of varied deliberation, debate and discourse is critical to the survival of its newly expanding public sphere. In turn, this public sphere is central to the mobilization of an informed and politically active Iraqi population. While this cannot be taken in lieu of a truly robust democracy, it nonetheless indicates not only the fundamental role that the post-Saddam Iraqi media can continue to play in fostering Iraq's nascent civil society, but also the degree to which the myriad peoples of Iraq can make informed decisions about the nuances of their sophisticated political landscape.

Endnotes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2008 Asian Media Information and Communications (AMIC) Conference in Brisbane, Australia.

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