

Protest and the Media in Iraq: Introduction, the progress, the protest

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Abstract- The Iraqi media industry has witnessed a significant change after the American led invasion in 2003. This period is considered to be a major period of transformation in Iraq media history, as it moved from a completely restricted form of media coverage to one of the most open media sectors in the Middle East. After the fall of Saddam Hussein regime Iraqi media sector witnessed the emergence of 'free-for-all media' and a significant number of media productions released as a mouthpieces of various 'political, religious, or ethnic groups'. This new form of media played an important role in serving as a communication tool of the Iraqi population as a whole. However, that role has been affected by sectarian agendas and the domination of media ownership. The new media landscape has developed in an era of domination, based on the presence of new controlling forms, including ethno-sectarian, political, Islamic, and independent factions, as well as the appearance of media personas. The emergence of this new media affected significantly the way that issues were dealt with in the country, especially the wave of protests that spread across Iraq. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the media role in covering and dealing with the protests happened in the country. Additionally, it shows the role that social media sites played sustaining such protests.

Index Terms- Media industry in Iraq, changes, traditional media, Social media, protests.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Iraqi media landscape witnessed a significant development since the end of the draconian control by the Ba'ath party in 2003. Media components start to serve as an Iraqi population voice to deliver their own social, economic and political problems. Media sector has been considered as a mirror to reflect the view of the real situations that Iraqi people face in their daily life. A number of Iraqi media channels have played a challenging role particularly in facing the shortcomings of the Iraqi government by addressing various issues such as corruption, services shortcomings, poverty, and unemployment as well as calling for governmental reform. At the same time, several channels have broadcasted entertainment programs as an outlet for many Iraqi people. Indeed, it is important to state that such media diversity has impacted positively since 2003. In spite of the fact that the Iraqi media landscape has currently reached an era of incredible evolution, unfortunately a new domination form has been emerged. This kind of domination was directed by an ethno-sectarian, political, Islamic, and independent factions, as well as media characters. All means of communication have been owned either by Arab Sunni, Arab Shi'a parties, Iraqi

Kurdish or Turkmen groups. Such groups dominate the most media outlet such as TV channels, radio stations and prints. The main stream of such media production is mainly used to disseminate its owner's agendas and ideologies. This form of manipulated media has massively participated in the crisis of sectarianism and fragmentation of the Iraqi population. Serving particular agendas and reflecting certain ideologies might be the clear objective in recent Iraq's media outlet. It seems that the new controlling process of the media sector in Iraq consist of certain implications which have imposed new restrictions on media activities. Nevertheless, the neutral independent media also has been presented in the Iraqi media industry. Such type of mass media form could be described as non-affiliated ones. The main characteristic of this type of media is the lack of the governmental funds and physical protection provided by political factions. Hence, it might be worth to declare that the new Iraqi media has shaped for the Iraqi population their own type of media.

II. IRAQI MEDIA PRE AND POST 2003

A-Iraqi media Scene before 2003: brief overview

Until 2003, the media state in Iraq was tightly controlled by the Ba'ath Party and Saddam Hussein's Iron government. In 1968, the Ba'ath Party detained power in Iraq and Saddam Hussein seized the presidency through it in 1979 (Ewad and Eton, 2013). Since that period and over 35 years Sadam's rule the flow of information was controlled and the media in Iraq constructed to serve the government agendas. Iraqi media agencies were all owned by the government and run through the Ministry of Information who allowed the Ba'ath party to direct media production in Iraq by directing and supervising daily press releases and broadcasting programs. There was only one main TV channel named Iraqi TV, which was mainly directed to broadcast patriotic songs and government news (mastersofmedia, 2012). Another TV channel called "Al-shabab TV" was owned by Sadam Hussein eldest son Uday Saddam (mastersofmedia, 2012). Also the oppressive domination of media sector extended when the Uday Saddam has been chosen to lead the Iraqi Journalists Union In the early 1990s (Isakhan 2009; Bengio 2004: 111; Daragahi 2003: 47; Bengio 1998: 8).. In addition, radio operation and daily newspapers production were also censored by Ba'ath faction. There was only five newspapers and four radio stations (Amos, 2010). According to the International Alliance for Justice (as cited in: Daragahi, 2003; 46) Ba'th rule executed and detained more than 500 Iraqi journalists and writers. Ofra Bengio has described the mediascape as 'an omnipotent propaganda machine (which) played the role of the

Ba'ath regime watchdog, thus contributing to its survival and longevity' (Bengio 2004:109-110). Iraq witnessed several wars and being under sanctions for thirteen years which negatively impacted people's life and Iraq became a completely isolated from the outside world. The key objective of media production at that time was nothing than serving government interests. The Media policy and information release process adopted by Baathist regime was vindictive and psychologically influenced life in Iraq (Ewad and Eton, 2013). Iraqis concluded that the media system was nothing more than being as a mouthpiece of Saddam Hussein government. President speeches, wars' scenes and patriotic songs were the key production of the media establishments during his rule. At the time people around the world were enjoying the advent of the internet as a new vehicle of communication, Iraqis were prevented from using that new technology. The information access was limited and very few people were able to use internet. Furthermore, Saddam Hussein's government banned the use of Satellite receivers. The Population as well as elite personas was even not allowed to install or use it. However few people were challenging such restrictions and taking the risk by installing satellite receivers and dishes. It's worth saying that the restrictions of media sector at that era was extensive and the Laws legislated were widely controlled free expression. The Media environment was neither independent nor isolated from the government rules. At The end of the Ba'ath's regime the media framework in Iraq bloomed and new era of communication emerged.

III. B-IRAQI MEDIA SCENE AFTER 2003: BRIEF OVERVIEW

The toppling of Saddam Hussein at the hand of the coalition forces in 2003 war, aided the Iraqi media environment to transform completely from being a tightly censored media environment by Saddam's regime into one of the most uncontrolled media landscapes in the Middle East (Amos, 2010). Iraqis are exposed to national TV media and Iraqi TV channels were an important source of information than any other means including radio, newspapers and the internet. Furthermore, the use of satellite receivers and dishes has been allowed and the people flocked to the local markets to purchase Satellite receivers and dishes despite of its high cost. They were eager to be connected to the outside world through more than 300 channel satellite channels (Isakhan 2009; Cochrane 2006; Price 2003). Hence, the restriction imposed by the Ba'ath regime on media productions vanished and new bloom era of Iraqi media emerged. On 21st April 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) substituted Saddam Hussein's Ministry of Information by the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) which was responsible for censoring new media productions (Rugh 2004: 116, cited in Isakhan 2009). Iraqi media network (IMN) has been considered as one of the significant stages in the development of media environment in Iraq. The CPA or Iraqi government did not fund the whole Iraq's TV channels, radio stations and printed media. A new media landscape had been placed in Iraq in which many Radio stations, printed media and TV channels existed in the country as well as the public debates and criticisms of nation issues had started. By mid-2003, media production in Iraq changed in which More than 20 radio stations, nearly 200 newspaper and 15-17 TV channel Aired. Additionally, it can be

noted that even smaller regions' centers like Najaf center released more than 30 newspapers (Isakhan 2009; Radio Netherland 2003f; Finer 2005; BBC News 2005d; Whitaker 2003; Gerth 2005; Zanger 2005:107). In spite the fact that Iraq turned to be an open country and the new media communication and free expression became available and Iraqi media platforms have been expanded significantly, after extensive control of Saddam's regime, which marked as a positive change in media sector. However, a new era of manipulation appeared and media outlets have been controlled by powerful political, religious and ethnic factions as well as business figures, which have employed the new Iraqi media platforms such as TV channels, radio stations and newspaper to promote their own agendas and ideologies (Price et al, 2007). The vast majority of media establishments have been funded by those factions. Actually, the variety of ethno – religious and class positions in Iraqi population have established a complex political and social situation in the country, which in turn extensively affected the media outlets.

IV. OWNERSHIP OF IRAQI MEDIA BROADCAST AFTER 2003

The media in Iraq was governed by new indirect controllers under the process of ownership and funding. Such new controllers varied between ethnic and religious groups as Rugh stated "Nearly half identified themselves as official organs of political or religious groups" (Rugh, 2006). This has enlarged the sectarian diversity among the Iraqi community and became obvious through the different types of media outlets. Price et al.,(2007), mentioned that 'Ethnic factions among the Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens, and religious-sectarian factions among the Sunni, Shi'a and Christians all have their own means of communication to their ethno-sectarian constituencies in Iraq and abroad in the Iraqi diaspora'. There are no neutral outlets and "Iraq's media landscape had become a mirror of Iraq's political-sectarian divisions" (Amos, 2010). Therefore, it might classify the new Iraq's media into the following groups as AL-Marashi identify it : (1) Iraqi state media (2) Political Islamist groups (religious/sectarian factions) media, (3) Ethnic political parties' media (4) Anti-state media, and finally (5) Independent Media (AL-Marashi, 2006). Certain channels might be identified in order to represent each of the above mentioned categories, for instance:

1. Iraqi state media (AL Iraqi a TV channel terrestrial TV channel, two radio stations, and the Al-Sabah newspaper)
2. Political Islamist groups (religious/sectarian factions) media
 - A- Arab Shi'a Media (Al-Furat satellite channel)
 - B- Arab Sunni Media (Rafidayn Channel and the Baghdad Satellite Channel)
3. Ethnic political parties' media ((PUK) satellite channel KurdSat)
4. Anti-state media (Al Zawraa Satellite Channel)
5. Independent Media (Al-Baghdadiyya, Al-Diyar, Al-Fayha, Al-Sharqiyya and Al-Sumariyya).

V. TRADITIONAL IRAQI MEDIA PRACTICE AND PROTESTS

The Categorization of the Iraqi media industry have played an important role in effecting the way that media outlets dealt with the events and protests occurred in different parts of Iraq. Iraq's media failed to offer neutral media. Traditional media platforms such as TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers mainly linked to the Ethnic factions, religious-sectarian factions, and the Iraqi government as well as political parties in Iraq. Price reported that "Ethno-sectarian 'media empires' have formed in Iraq and are quite a pervasive element in the Iraq's Fourth Estate" (Price et al, 2007). This variation of the Iraqi media can be clearly noted through the way that the Iraqi media tackled protests happened in the country after the Arab spring events in 2011. In that period, the Anti-Maliki government protests, launched in 2011, classified the media actions in accordance with the way they reported such demonstrations. On February 12-2011 many Iraqi people from different positions grouped in Tahrir Square, shouted "No, no to corruption," "The government are thieves" and "Baghdad, Baghdad, spark a revolution"(Sly, 2011). Another one has been scheduled on Feb. 25 in the same square and it titled "Revolution of Iraqi Rage" (Sly, 2011). Iraqi people continued their demonstrations all over the country; calling on the government to address their needs. The non-neutral position that media outlets shows regarding the news of the protests revealed its own belonging and ownership. Beehner stated that "The majority of Iraqi newspapers are funded by governmental advertisements." (Beehner.2006). The State media tried to downplay the effect of such demonstrations by controlling media outlets. Journalists and live media coverage were prevented by Iraqi government from covering the event of protests in an attempt to tone down their importance (AL-Rawi, 2014). Additionally the independent satellite channels prohibited from acting freely. So that, the emphasis or amount of coverage given to protests could show clearly the biased position of media outlets at that time. In spite of the fact that the Iraqi media has been revolutionized since the American invasion in 2003, the traditional media outlets in Iraq is highly directed and if you need to have a full picture of the daily events it might be advisable to watch different Media productions and news channels.

VI. INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN IRAQ

Recently, Internet platforms are considered to be as one of the most important ways of interactions and free expression. The number of internet and social media sites as a means of communication, have raised significantly (Abedalla et al. 2014). Iraq was not isolated from using this new communication technology which was also presented during Saddam Hussein's regime, but it was limited and controlled. Rashid (2012) indicated that, although the existence of the Internet was found in Iraq before the American invasion in 2003, it was hardly accessible by the public and very limited as it was considered as a threat for the state. After the American invasion in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's rule, internet witnessed a significant change and expanded dramatically as the number of the internet users increased noticeably (Arab IP Centre, 2014). This was due to the improvement in the economic situation in Iraq. According to the global scale, Iraq has been ranked as 126th

in home Internet access among other countries (CIA, 2014). Iraqi people started enjoying the use of this facility and connect to the virtual world, interacting and reflecting different views including: political, social, economic and ethical views.

Iraqi people have been mainly using internet as means of communication, basically through its various applications such as yahoo Messenger and Skype. Viper and Skype are considered among the most popular apps used in Iraqis nowadays (Rashid, 2012). The number of computer mediated communication (CMC) users risen dramatically especially with the arrival of social media networks such as Facebook, twitter and YouTube. According to (Alexa, 2013), Facebook and YouTube are considered among the most popular social media sites in Iraq respectively. Iraqi citizens were eager to use open and transparent means of communications to discuss various issues as they remain suspicious of owned and sponsored media. Recently, Social media has witnessed a substantial improvement with increased rate of internet hosts which reached 26 (CIA, 2014). In spite of Iraqis internet using is ranked low, the Facebook users reached to 2.3 million users (Rashid, 2012). The use of Internet and social media played a vital role in Iraq, as it participated greatly in developing the media environment. However, there are still some fears that the social media in Iraq might follow Iraq's traditional media footsteps.

VII. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PROMOTING PROTESTS AND DISSENTS

The Information technology has positively impacted Iraq and people have joined the global trends by interacting positively through this new technology. Social network sites were among the most important venues which attracted many Iraqis who were aware of the events that happened in the Arab world. During the Arab Spring, Iraqis were not isolated from the events happened in most of other Arab countries such as Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. Events accrued there had prepared for and launched by using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The effect of Arab world events mainly impacted the Iraqi people who they started voice their dissatisfaction with the government and calling on it to address their needs and daily difficulties faced by the average citizens. Iraqis decided to publicly display their disagreements with their governments by leading dozens of protests that began on February 12, 2011 (AL-Rawi, 2014). During the protests, Iraqi Government adopted several tactics to blackout the news of the protests in an attempt to control the situation and downplaying the importance of these protests. Government banned live media coverage and prevented journalists from covering the events. Despite the measures used by the government, thousands of Iraqis from all over the country protested against the state, and many of them used social media sites. A group of educated people from different positions and unemployed youth started to gather on Facebook and post their opinions and views as well as showing their concern regarding different issues. They started to use social media to disseminate the idea of revolution, plan and organize the protests against the government. Many protests swept in different parts of the country and activists used social media platforms as an alternative media channels to promote and post their views and

share the events despite the governments' pressure and threats. Indeed, Social media played pivotal role in mobilizing protests, protesters relied heavily on the use of new media platform as they considered it a free and less control venues to express their opinions and share their ideas. Activist employed social media sites to unify public opinion, and enhance the public sphere by offering a virtual environment for the exchange of views and sharing ideas. Many Facebook pages invented such as "Iraqi revolution" and "The Revolution of Rage" which carried different banners written in Arabic like "We don't ask for skyscrapers . . . We want you to fix the sewage," or "Congratulations! Prize for World Class Corruption" (AL-Rawi 2014). It's important to state that the Iraq's spring lacked the attention of Western media due to the effect of ongoing ethno-sectarian violence in the country, which in turn overshadowed the calls which demanded for social and political reforms.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Iraqi media environment has changed radically after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iraqis have various outlets in which hundreds of newspapers and tens of radio stations and TV channels were produced. These outlets have enabled them to express their views, requirements, complaints and frustrations. Number of new media productions in Iraq particularly the ones that characterized of being independent have played their fourth estate role by challenging the government for its shortcomings. All of these changes and developments are considered as positive indications for the future of Iraq's media. However, one emergent problem that happened following these initiatives and developments was that new media domination and ownership. The new media landscape has developed in an era of domination, based on the evolving of this new controlling form. The existence of different ethno, religious factions and groups has widely impacted the media sphere in Iraq. Those factions and groups own various media outlets such as newspapers, radio stations and satellite TV stations, which represent the most widely consumed media in Iraq. Thus, Iraq's media are increasingly divided along ethno-sectarian lines. The emergence of this new ethno-sectarian media affected significantly the way that issues were dealt with in the country, especially the wave of protests that spread across Iraq. In order to have the best practices for the Iraqi media, the researcher recommend that the Iraqi government should encourage finding independent media. Media outlets have not to be biased and Iraqi media establishments should have well-organized strategies to improve the quality of their work. This in fact will enable them to find more powerful and effective media production.

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