

Issue Paper: The Media and Ethno-Sectarian Dynamics in Iraq

Ibrahim Al-Marashi

The Role of Media and Conflict

Media institutions have the capability of affecting vast audiences and in a time of conflict, they become important actors, on par with the actual combatants themselves. Media outlets have the potential of being one of the most powerful tools in increasing awareness of ethno-sectarian divisions in deeply divided societies, and they also have the potential to shape and influence public attitudes in overcoming tensions in such societies. The media can play a role in transmitting hostility, whether it is between states, or ethnic and sectarian groups and can exacerbate tensions by spreading misperceptions or exaggerations.

The constructive transformation of a conflict can only occur if it affects the mentalities of either an individual or a society, and the media can play a role in this transformation, by building confidence between the parties and challenging the misperceptions. However, this is the exception rather than the norm. While the literature on media and conflict focuses primarily on the role of media in covering conflict, or the role of media in exacerbating conflict, there is an emerging literature on how media can resolve conflicts. Such studies offer framework on how to examine the role of that media plays in ethnic conflict, and can be applied to analyzing the potential of the media in heightening or easing ethno-sectarian tensions in Iraq.

The Case of Iraq

The case that most vividly demonstrates the role of media and conflict is that of Rwanda. Rwanda illustrates how the media can become a weapon in a time of conflict. In this example, there were four elements present that led to the rise of a “conflict media”: 1) strong ideologies, 2) parties to the conflict with control over mass media, imbued with populism, and demagoguery, 3) psychological preparation to hate, and 4) calls to violence. [1] In the case of Rwanda, studies of media exacerbating ethnic tensions unfortunately failed to materialize prior to the conflict and the existing literature has been retrospective in nature. A proactive analysis of the Iraqi media and its portrayal of ethno-sectarian differences in Iraqi society can isolate whether the media is exacerbating cleavages in Iraq, or is it facilitating a positive attitude in bridging the differences between its communities.

Observers of the situation in Iraq often predict the nation will face an imminent civil war among ethnic Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs, and among the Sunni and Shia Muslim sects. Often such pessimistic forecasts are based on mere speculation, ignoring the fact that these three ethnic communities managed to coexist for eighty years, dispelling the notion that only Saddam Hussein’s “strong arm tactics” kept the nation united. However, the public discourse in Iraq, especially following the March 2006 bombing of a Shia shrine featured the increasing use of ethno-sectarian terminology. While differences had always existed between Iraq’s Arab Shia, Sunni and Kurds, such divisions were never discussed

openly and were glaringly absent in the Iraqi media that emerged after the fall of the Ba'ath government in 2003.

There are four determining factors within the media system, to ascertain whether it can exacerbate a conflict:

- 1) *political context*: the rule of law versus despotic authority
- 2) *economic conditions*: the media as an autonomous economic organisation or one subject to governmental control (media as part of the state apparatus)
- 3) *quality of journalism*: critical and analytic reporting or mere functioning as “stenographers of power” using the “language of hate”
- 4) *public attitudes*: enlightened democratic traditions or authoritarian value systems. [2]

In terms of the political context in Iraq, under the Ba'athists the rule of law was determined by Saddam Hussein, who could issue legal decrees at his personal whim, only to change them the next day. In post-Saddam Iraq, despotic authority still exists in tribal, religious or ethnic structures. While there are autonomous media organizations in Iraq, there are equally, if not more powerful stations subject to control of political factions within the Iraqi government, but not directly controlled by the Iraqi state. In terms of quality of journalism, critical and analytic reporting are developing in Iraq, yet at the same time, other media outlets do serve as the “stenographers of power,” which at this juncture have reserved their use of the “language of hate,” but are in a position to employ it in the future. As for public attitudes, enlightened democratic traditions will take years to form in Iraq, as the norm in the past was “authoritarian value systems,” and they continue to exist on sectarian, ethnic and tribal levels.

While a diversity of opinion in Iraq is a positive sign since the fall of the Ba'ath, when there were only five state owned dailies and a single government channel, it appears that the post-war Iraqi media is forming along ethno-sectarian lines. Powerful media are coalescing around ethno-political groups in Iraq who have print, radio and TV media at their disposal. Iraqi Kurdish, Turkmen, Arab Sunnis and Arab Shias factions all have their own means of communicating to their ethno-sectarian constituencies in Iraq and abroad in the Iraqi diaspora. Other independent media with no ethno-sectarian affiliation do exist, but do not have access to the funds that the political parties can provide. The problem of sectarianism reflected in the Iraqi media poses a challenge for other Iraqi media which seek to reflect the developments in Iraqi society according to international journalistic standards.

An examination of the discourse of media outlets during national events that tend to have ramifications for all of Iraq's communities, such as Iraq's first election on January 30, 2005, revealed little tensions between these groups. As the debates from August 2005 to November 2005 on Iraq's constitutional process began, where the allocation of power and funds were negotiated, the ethno-sectarian discourse grew in intensity. Following the bombing of the Shia Al-‘Askariyya shrine in the city of Samarra in March 2006, the

various ethno-sectarian media outlets escalated tensions but eventually called for restraint among Iraq's communities.

However, in the long term, various ethno-sectarian media outlets could prove problematic. Such an arrangement can only further the gap between Iraq's communities, developing identities along ethno-sectarian lines, and weakening any kind of national belonging. The Rwandan genocide was sparked by a single event – the assassination of the Rwandan President. If a prominent, charismatic Iraqi religious or ethnic leader were to be murdered, this could touch off a similar scenario, mobilizing the targeted community to seek out revenge against the other, with the ethno-sectarian media playing a prominent role in a potential conflict.

Lessons and Recommendations for Iraq's Media

The media sector is at a stage where elements of Iraq's Fourth estate can reinforce its ethno-sectarian divisions and a strategy needs to be developed on how to offer recommendations to counter its employment of negative images and stereotypes of other communities.

Bodies have formed in Iraq to create legislation to regulate the media, such as the National Commission on Media and Communication and the Iraqi Higher Media Committee. However, media regulation does not solve the problem of educating journalists on social responsibility and reporting during times of conflict. Education for media practitioners is crucial, given that that professional standards and practical training for journalists is relatively new in a society that repressed its media in the past. Schools of journalism existed in Iraq, but instruction focused on promotion of the views of the state Ba'ath Party. Under the circumstances of ethno-sectarian reporting in Iraq, recommendations need to be elucidated on how to raise awareness of international standards in journalism to media practitioners.

The activities and recommendations made by scholars, media practitioners and organizations that have been involved with developing the media in other conflict-ridden societies should be applied to Iraq, whether it is on behalf of international organization or local institutions in Iraqi itself. Based on past precedents of media in deeply-divided societies, there are several lessons for Iraq. International media watch organizations should take an interest in monitoring the media in Iraq. There are a plethora of international media organizations that can offer training to Iraqi media owners and journalists and recommendations need to be made in order to direct these efforts. Finally, policy recommendations can be directed to international organizations that seek to address weaknesses in the Iraqi media by offering training and financial assistance.

The conflict between Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities needs to be addressed in the media to serve as a safety valve for the nation. The key for the future of Iraq's stability is transforming this debate into a constructive one, with the local media finding a role in this transformation.

Sources:

[1] Monique Alexis and Ines Mpambara, "IMS Assessment Mission: The Rwanda Media Experience From the Genocide," International Media Support Report, March 2003.

[2] Dusan Reljic, "The News Media and the Transformation of Ethnopolitical Conflicts," Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, December 2002.