

# The Role of Broadcast Media in Influence Operations in Iraq

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May 19, 2003

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

Successfully shaping Iraqi public perceptions is vitally important, particularly since other well-known means of influencing the public -- creating stability and reestablishing water, power, and other public welfare services -- are taking longer than expected. Yet, the coalition has arguably been slower to shape the Iraqi media environment than either indigenous political actors or Iranian state-sponsored media networks.

## Background

In Ba'ath Iraq, the ownership and operation of media, particularly broadcast media, was strictly controlled by the government. Uday Husayn, Saddam's increasingly marginalized elder son, directed the youth-oriented media, such as the Babel newspaper. The Ba'ath government also limited access to foreign news, enforcing a ban on satellite dishes needed to receive foreign satellite television broadcasts.

To be sure, Baghdad's monopoly was not complete. In Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, free media flourished. Many newspapers appeared, including some in Arabic. There were also private television stations, some of which could be seen in parts of Saddam-controlled Iraq. And external radio broadcasts, including some by Iraqi dissident groups, were supported by the U.S., Saudi Arabian, Jordanian, and Iranian governments. In 1998, the U.S. government established Radio Free Iraq as part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and in 2002 it established Radio Sawa, which has a lively music format aimed at young people, with limited news broadcasts and a specific service aimed at Iraqis.

## Indigenous Media Developments

All the major postwar political factions present in Baghdad have established newspapers, which are quick to set up and can be produced cheaply enough that impoverished Iraqis prefer them to the dribble of expensive imported papers now appearing in the country. The first locally produced postwar daily -- issues of the London-based al-Zaman, published in Baghdad and Basra -- will be produced by Saad Bazzaz, who had been editor of al-Jumhuriya before he fled the country in 1992; thereafter he worked with the U.S. government and published the London-based issue of al-Zaman. Broadcast media, where the financial and technical entry requirements are more demanding, are now developing. The deposed self-styled mayor of Baghdad, Mohammed Zubeidi, developed early name recognition from the fact that he established the first local radio broadcasts after the fall of Saddam's regime. The main Kurdish

and Turkmen parties have established new radio stations and even some television stations in Baghdad and Kirkuk, extending their coverage to new parts of the country. The Iraqi Communist Party now transmits within Iraq, albeit for only one hour a day. In Najaf and Mosul, television stations have been set up by locals. Although a U.S. military censor oversees the Mosul television studio to prevent it from becoming an organ for local politicians, it is unclear what control, if any, the U.S. authorities are exercising over other local radio and television stations.

#### Iranian Broadcasting Activities

The Iranian government also hit the ground running by establishing a range of broadcast media operations specifically aimed at shaping opinion in Iraq. The Iran-supported Voice of the Mujaheddin radio is the mouthpiece of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). In Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province near southern Iraq, Iranian radio continues to broadcast three Arabic-language stations. Iran also broadcasts on at least two television stations dedicated to Iraqi viewers: Sahar TV and al-Alam. Sahar TV's two channels are satellite only and are aimed at promoting the Islamic Republic in the Arab world. The new al-Alam is both terrestrial and satellite, broadcasting from antennae in Iran as close as ninety miles from Baghdad. This technically well-produced, lively, and popular twenty-four-hour channel rivals satellite channel al-Jazeera in its formula -- interspersing news with pop music videos -- but is far more accessible in Iraq, where satellite dishes are unaffordable for most. Best of all, al-Alam is perceived by Iraqi Shi'is to be local rather than foreign in character. The political tone of Iranian radio and television broadcasts into Iraq focuses on opposition to U.S. occupation, exaggerating civilian casualties, and using the slogan "war for control" to describe Operation Iraqi Freedom.

#### Coalition Efforts

Coalition media activities have been slower than fast-developing indigenous and Iranian efforts. Aside from locally distributed U.S. Army newsletters, the coalition is only now establishing a 50,000-copy daily newspaper called al-Sabah. Like most newspapers, this will only be available in Baghdad, highlighting the importance of radio and television in reaching the broader population.

During and immediately after the war, the main U.S. effort was EC-130E Commando Solo aircraft flying for a few hours a day over Iraq, broadcasting both radio and Towards Freedom TV, a CIA-run station transmitting on Iraq Channel 3 frequency. These broadcasts, described as hard to receive, fuzzy, and uninteresting, have utilized presenters speaking in non-Iraqi dialects.

To rectify these weaknesses, the Pentagon Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) has an Indigenous Media Project; key figures include ORHA coordinator Robert Reilly (formerly of Voice of America) and Radio Free Iraq's Ahmed al-Rikabi. On April 17, ORHA established the Iraq Media Network to coordinate truck-mounted Special Operations Media Systems (SOMS-B), which have broadcast Information Radio, Voice of New Iraq Radio, and a new television station. In addition, Britain has established Nahrain TV in Basra. These stations will now begin to transition from part-time (five to six hours per day) military-run psychological-operations channels -- which can be heavy-handed and not very interesting -- to fulltime sources of entertainment and news that can sustain popular attention. New media developed by ORHA will expect editorial freedom over content, in the spirit of Radio Free Iraq; the new U.S.-run television station had operated for less than a week before it publicly decried perceived censorship by ORHA.

Coalition broadcasts are supplemented by Iraqi opposition groups that have long worked with the U.S. government. The Iraqi National Accord, a grouping of former-Ba'athists, continues to run three radio stations -- Radio Sumer (formerly Radio Tikrit), Two Rivers Radio, and The Future (al-Mustaqbal) -- in cooperation with the CIA and Jordanian intelligence. Voice of the Iraqi People, run from Jeddah by Iraqi expatriates and the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate, continues to promote Saudi policy in Iraq after over a decade of operation. In contrast,

Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, still waiting for \$4 million of withheld State Department funding, lacks a dedicated radio or television service.

### Policy Implications

Until satellite dishes are widely distributed and many more Iraqis are exposed to al-Jazeera, Hizballah's al-Manar television, and Palestinian television, the United States has a window of opportunity to shape perceptions in Iraq and to balance developing indigenous and Iranian influences. An interagency effort is required to make best use of limited coalition and Iraqi technical resources and expert manpower. Programming must be lively and aimed at the large and politically important youth population, and, taking a leaf from Iran's successful al-Alam broadcasts, it must involve more Iraqi natives. Any hint of censorship will diminish the effect of broadcasts. An alternative to censorship that would be widely accepted by Iraqi broadcasters is a licensing system that issues permits for new radio and television stations; hence, a communications regulation agency is urgently needed. Finally, it must be remembered that a pro-American local media is no substitute for concrete improvements in local conditions.

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