

Strengthening the Kadhimi Government (Part 2): Countering Militia Media

[Bilal Wahab](#)

July 16, 2020

The Iraqi state is losing the media war to groups that oppose its sovereignty and benefit from continued instability, so Baghdad and Washington should step up their counter-messaging.

[Read Part 1, which covered protection and security issues.](#)

Iraqis currently enjoy a level of press freedom that is unparalleled in the Arab world. Yet while most neighboring countries labor under state propaganda, Iraq is battling a different media enemy—militia propaganda against the state. Surfing Iraqi television channels, one is likely to come away with the misapprehension that the public is obsessed with “resisting America” and forcing out the 5,000 U.S. troops stationed there to help fight the Islamic State (IS). Yet only a handful of these 100-plus networks reflect what [polling data](#) and personal conversations with Iraqis reveal as the public’s true priorities: mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic, surviving the financial crisis, and enjoying a few extra hours of electricity amid the scorching summer heat. And nowhere does one hear the voice of the Iraqi state in this militia media cacophony.

Indeed, the outsize role that militias now play in Iraq has been facilitated by the ubiquity of television, radio, and social media outlets that tout the virtues of these armed groups, ignore their destabilizing behavior, crowd out Iraqi nationalist voices, and demonize any dissenting voices. For example, the [July 6 murder](#) of Iraqi analyst Hisham al-Hashemi was preceded by an intensive character assassination campaign, with various outlets calling him an American agent and circulating hit lists that included his name. Similarly, media organs run by militias and certain political parties systematically denounced the demonstrators who began protesting corruption and other government abuses last October. By calling them “sons of the [U.S.] embassy” and other derogatory names, these outlets sought to excuse a crackdown that wound up killing more than 600 protestors and maiming thousands more. If left unchecked, this media environment will make it nearly impossible for Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s new government to rein in the militias or adequately address the country’s other pressing problems.

MILITIA-DOMINATED MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Iraq’s intensely competitive politics have created a media problem: the increasingly cynical populace has come to view much of the nation’s journalism as no more than partisan mudslinging. This sentiment has exacerbated public mistrust of political factions to the point where many party offices across the country were ransacked during last year’s protests.

Yet partisan media outlets persist because political factions see them as integral to nurturing their patronage networks and prepping the ground for election cycles. Newsworthiness is no longer the threshold for coverage on these networks, let alone any sense of responsibility for reporting the state’s efforts to carry out basic functions like ensuring territorial sovereignty and monopolizing control over military weapons. Last month, for example, the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service made the unprecedented move of directly confronting a powerful Iranian-backed militia, [raiding a base](#) run by the U.S.-designated terrorist organization Kataib Hezbollah and seizing weapons aimed at the government center. Yet the local media response was virtual silence, whether due to fear or a venal conspiracy among party elites who prefer a lawless environment in which their corruption can continue.

Meanwhile, government media arms are in woeful condition. When U.S. authorities abolished the Saddam-era Ministry of Information after the 2003 invasion, its replacement—the Iraqi Media Network—was taken over by the same political parties that have mastered the art of carving up other government spoils. The commission currently employs over 5,000 staff and oversees a handful of outlets such as *al-Sabaah* newspaper and al-Iraqiya television. Yet it appears wholly out of its league compared to the more numerous militia outlets, and sometimes seems to forget who it is supposed to serve. In April, for example, al-Iraqiya interrupted regular programming to [live-broadcast a twenty-five-minute speech](#) by Qais al-Khazali, the U.S.-designated leader of the militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq, who lashed out against both America and the Iraqi government.

Prime Minister Kadhimi comes from a journalistic background and brought along a strong media team when he took office in May. But his government needs to do more in terms of reminding state outlets who they represent and expanding the profile of state media activities. To many Iraqis, [Ahmad Al-Basheer’s](#) weekly satirical program has done more to promote Iraqi nationalism than state media has.

FUNDING AND COORDINATING MILITIA PROPAGANDA

Although diverse and at times competitive, militia media outlets share a similar modus operandi and generally work in tandem toward the same broad goals: countering state efforts to limit sectarianism, normalizing loyalty to Iran, and demonizing any contacts with the West. Such bullying has led many Iraqi officials to curtail their communications with U.S. officials.

During the 2018 election campaign, this media machine emphasized the militias' role in the military victory against IS while downplaying the vital role played by the Iraqi security forces and their international partners. In contrast, state media did little to boost the heroism of the Counter Terrorism Service and other agencies. Unsurprisingly, when the votes were tallied, Asaib Ahl al-Haq had increased its number of parliamentary seats from one to fourteen, greatly enhancing its political and media sway. Mass protests and COVID-19 have only accelerated this trend, with militias shuttering offices but doubling down on their media presence.

In terms of funding, the Popular Mobilization Forces law of 2016 gave legal cover to unruly militias and allowed them to access state revenues. By 2019, the PMF operating budget had reached \$2.16 billion, on top of the extra resources militias were tapping into via their new government connections and border smuggling.

Iran plays a crucial role in militia media efforts as well. Beyond providing the initial seed money for many of the outlets in question, it helps coordinate their messaging through regular meetings with Iraqi network directors at the Tehran-based Islamic Radio and Television Union. In May, for example, the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) boasted that twenty Iraqi channels had broadcast Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's Qods Day speech. Whenever militia channels air such content, a host of "social media armies" disseminate it across multiple platforms, paying top dollar to boost it online.

Another pernicious effect of these practices has been to challenge Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's religious and nationalist authority while boosting Khamenei's narratives. This includes undermining the 2014 fatwa in which Sistani asked Iraqis "not to form armed militias" and urged them to join the formal security forces instead. As he put it, "all arms should be under state authority."

IRAQ'S TO-DO LIST

Kadhimi's government has a solid nationalist message that resonates with the public, but this message is of little use if it is not communicated well or is drowned out by the militia propaganda machine. Anti-Kadhimi media have already shown that they can derail even modest reform efforts—recently, for example, they stoked public protests against well-intended austerity measures. The specter of endless protests and counter-protests only exacerbates Iraq's instability and favors the armed militia parties.

Setting the right expectations is therefore crucial. The government cannot continue over-promising, under-delivering, and sending mixed signals, as it did when it arrested Kataib Hezbollah militants but then ignominiously released them to militia custody.

As for countering propaganda, Kadhimi has ample executive authority to enforce laws, licensing regulations, and financial audits that could limit the incitement spewing from many militia and partisan political outlets. This includes prosecuting hate speech according to Iraq's anti-terrorism laws and other portions of the penal code. Another crucial reform would be to better regulate the finances of political parties, militias, and their media conglomerates.

In addition, Kadhimi needs to clean house at state media agencies, replacing officials who are loyal to the factions that hired them rather than Iraq (e.g., the officials who run the Iraqi Media Network are Maliki-era leftovers from the Islamic Dawa Party). State outlets also need to stop shying away from describing militia rocket attacks and assassinations as terrorist acts. Finally, media offices that were ordered to shut down during last year's protests should be permitted to reopen, including the U.S.-funded Alhurra network and the Iraqi Kurdish network Nalia Radio and Television (NRT).

WASHINGTON'S TO-DO LIST

Although the U.S. government must remain unequivocally supportive of free speech and press in Iraq, it can still help Baghdad counter militia propaganda, buttress Iraqi sovereignty, and protect U.S.-Iraq relations. Doing so is especially important now that the bilateral strategic dialogue is being reset.

American assistance can be particularly effective on social media. U.S. and Iraqi authorities should coordinate their efforts to rapidly and definitively deny false militia narratives, expose them online, and report relevant accounts for closure. For example, Khazali retains an active Twitter account despite his U.S. terrorist designation, as do many other militia commanders who have used the platform to call for attacks on American and Iraqi targets.

To be sure, the United States has already expended ample capital and labor on building Iraq's media capacity and talent, only to see much of it shift over to party and militia outlets that pay better and offer protection. In today's landscape, a better approach would be to increase the flow of facts and credible news that U.S.-funded outlets deliver to Iraqi audiences. Alhurra has been increasingly effective on this front. The Irfaa Sawtak network was

similarly effective in countering IS hate speech and would be a good fit for challenging militia rhetoric. U.S. officials should also be more proactive about appearing on Iraqi media and speaking with the public directly. Finally, Washington should give Kadhim's team technical advice on reorganizing state media, such as [refitting al-Iraqiya in the image of C-SPAN](#).

Bilal Wahab is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.