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READ ALL ABOUT IT: THE FREE PRESS, THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND DEMOCRACY IN IRAQ

Despite a wealth of recent research which has detailed the impact that new media outlets and technologies have had on the Middle East's nascent public sphere and its role in promoting democracy, there has been little investigation into the re-emergence of the free press in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam in 2003 and the corresponding end to his tight control over the nation's media sector by reviewing Iraq's long relationship with the written word and its cor - responding public sphere. It traces the introduction of the printing press to Iraq by the Ottomans and details those periods when the Iraqi press was truly free, fostering the emergence of a civil society and democratic reforms (such as under the Young Turks, the early Hashemite era and following the Second World War). It also examines those periods when the Iraqi media was most restricted and did little else than praise the regime at hand (such as under Ottoman rule and most recently under the Baʿth regime, especially under Saddam Hussein). Following on, this article reviews the developments since the fall of Saddam Hussein and, despite the extensive interference in Iraq's media sector from gov - ernmental entities both outside and inside Iraq, it concludes by arguing that these papers have been central to the re-emergence of an Iraqi public sphere which has openly debated and discussed the issues surrounding the nation's shift from despotism to democracy.

Introduction

IN HABERMASIAN TERMS, the public sphere can be defined as that which "connects society with the state and thus has a function in the political realm" (Habermas 1996, 28). Essentially, it is constituted by those social institutions which engender a culture of open and rational debate amongst the citizenry in order to form public opinion (Edgar 2006, 124). Central to the formation of such a public sphere, or what we might oth- erwise term a civil society, is the people's autonomy, their access to infor- mation and their willingness to engage in such debates (Rutherford 2004,

141-142). Habermas also noted that one of the vehicles for both providing information to the populace and propagating debate were the early merchant newsletters of the sixteenth century (1989, 16) which "transformed into instruments of political debate under the pressures of the American and French revolutions and the organisation of political groups to revolutionise society" (Kellner and Durham 2001, 10-11). With the admission of journalists to the British House of Commons in 1803, political journalism began (Edgar 2006, 125) and the media has since been understood as crucial to the formation of a public sphere and civil society, which in turn underpin the media's role as the Fourth Estate of a functioning democracy (Calhoun 1992; Dahlgren 1995).

More recently, the role of Middle Eastern media in serving as the platform of the region's emerging public sphere and its role in promoting democracy has become the centre of much scholarly investigation. Starting with the Western radio stations beamed into the Middle East such as the BBC, the Voice of America and Radio Monte Carlo, 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 thirty 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 backed financially 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 audiotape, have proven effective in spreading messages of dissent. For example, during the late 1970s in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers made effective use of this technology by recording sermons over the phone from his exile in Paris and then distributing the contraband audiotapes across the nation (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994). More recent scholarship has illustrated the ways in which new media technologies such as fax and photocopy machines, desktop publishing software, advertising, romance novels (see the contributions in Eickelman and Anderson 2003b), recorded music, cinema, and 'postmodern' literature (see the contributions in Armbrust 2000) have allowed the people of the Arab world to evade and subvert the state-controlled media and create an autonomous 'public sphere' by disseminating information through non-official organs.

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 has led to Arab-based chan-

nels such as the Arab News Network, Abu Dhabi TV and, of course, Al-Jazeera. 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; see also Ayish, 1970). The Al-Jazeera "phenomenon" (Miladi 2003) has received a superfluity of academic attention in recent years, ranging from its adaptation of Western media techniques (Auter, Arafa, and Al-Jaber 2005), questioning its status as 'alternative media' (Iskandar 2006) and detailing its challenge to the hegemony of the Western medias monopoly on global news (Seib 2005). What is common throughout this research is an understanding that—in the words of Qatari media scholar Ali al-Hail—media outlets such as Al-Jazeera "are the best way to rein-vigorate 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 and Iskandar 2002, 28). Similarly, the issue of whether 'reality TV' is the best hope for democratization in the Middle East is the theme of a recent issue of 'Translational Broadcasting Studies' (especially Kraidy 2005). What is certain is that while Western media scholars lament the 'dumbing down' of the media and an erosion of its role in serving the 'public interest' and as the 'watch-dog' of democracy due to commercial interests, these same commercial interests may, ironically, be bringing more news, information and debate into the Middle East (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1998, 195).

Likewise the internet and its impacts on the Middle East have been investigated by a surfeit of academics from a number of different 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). 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 whereby pertinent issues facing the Arab world—such as questions of religion (J. W. Anderson 2003) and women's role in society (Skalli 2006)—can be re-examined and re-defined. Others have used the internet to critique their respective nation state or, at the very least as a locus for debate surrounding domestic issues of public concern and calls for democratization (Cunningham 2002; Teitelbaum 2002; Wheeler 2001). The net effect of these online developments has altered "the nature of the decision-making process in each country, weakening hierarchical systems, reducing the power of the

state, and redistributing power downward" (Ghareeb 2000, 398).

Collectively, this spectrum of media outlets and technologies—from the pan-Arab press to the internet, and from the audiotape to reality TV—has had tremendous impact on the societies of the Middle East. Firstly, as 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 (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 machinations of egalitarian governance. Although it is clear that many governments across the region are continuing their battle to keep the media on a tight leash, if the current technological and social trends continue, the media is likely to increase in diversity and openness, thereby spurring "greater debate in Middle East societies, with further pressures for both cultural and political democratisation" (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1998, 197).

However, despite this wealth of research, there has been little investigation into the re-emergence of the free press in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam in 2003 and the corresponding end to his tight control over the nation's media sector. This has seen Iraq shift from only a handful of state papers that served as propaganda machines, to a wealth of over 200 Iraqi-owned newspapers which are being fervently produced and avidly read on the streets of the nation. This article therefore begins by reviewing Iraq's long relationship with the written word and its corresponding public sphere. It traces the introduction of the printing press to Iraq by the Ottomans and details those periods where Iraq's press was truly free, fostering the emergence of a civil society and democratic reforms (such as under the Young Turks, the early Hashemite era of 1921-1938, and following the Second World War). It also examines those periods where the Iraqi media was most restricted and did little else than praise the regime at hand (such as the early Ottoman period and most recently under the Ba'th Regime, especially under Saddam Hussein). Following on, this article reviews the developments since the fall of Saddam Hussein and, despite the extensive interference in Iraq's media sector from the governmental entities both outside and inside Iraq, it concludes by arguing that these papers have been central to the re-emergence of an Iraqi public sphere which has openly debated and discussed the issues surrounding the nation's shift from despotism to democracy.

From cuneiform to propaganda: Iraq's long relationship with the written word

It is only in relatively recent times that we have come to understand the

historic importance and influence of the region known as Mesopotamia in the Ancient World, currently known as Iraq. In fact, it was the early city-states that developed across this 'cradle of civilization' around 3200 BC which fostered the development of early farming practices, including sophisticated irrigation and animal domestication, monumental arts and architecture, mass-produced goods such as pottery, and a complex, urbane and cosmopolitan society (Frankfort 1968, 49; Seymour 2004, 351; Van de Mieroop 1997, 36). The need to organize and administer the complexities of such large agricultural projects and a sophisticated temple and city economy prompted the development of the world's first written language (Frankfort 1968, 49-50; Jacobsen 1977a, 129; Van de Mieroop 1997, 36). This involved using a split reed to create the distinctive wedge-shaped marks known as cuneiform on clay tablets (Greaves, Zaller, Cannistrano and Murphey 1997, 18) which evolved from early markings concerning systems of weight and measurement through to a rich body of literary texts (for translations of a number of early cuneiform texts, see Pritchard 1968).

In addition, the major excavations of the twentieth century across the Middle East also revealed much about the political machinations employed in the ancient Near East. Of foremost relevance here is the governance of Mesopotamia's early city-states by a political system that Jacobsen has termed 'Primitive Democracy' (1970) where "ultimate political power rested with a general assembly of all adult freemen" (Jacobsen 1977b, 128) (for more on 'Primitive Democracy,' see Isakhan 2006b). This system of governance encouraged all citizens of the state—men and women (Saggs 2004, 30)—to exercise their right to express their opinion in a public forum regarding affairs that threatened the security of the state as a whole. In this situation, discussion continued until a virtual unanimity was reached and consensus emerged over the appropriate action (Jacobsen 1970, 138; Oppenheim 1964, 114). Beyond the deliberations of the assembly was a civic culture that extended into the day-to-day lives of the ancient Mesopotamian where citizens further discussed and debated social issues, often forming loose political alliances (Larsen 1976, 161-170).

However, examples of the centrality of the written word to the Middle East's civic culture are not limited to the annals of ancient history. In fact, the written word was critical to the expansion of Islam and went on to play a central role in the bureaucracy and thriving literary scene of both the Umayyad (661-750) and Abbasid (750-1258) Caliphates (Rosenthal 1975). Under the ʿAbbasids for example, the capital of the empire shifted from Damascus to Baghdad (Gutas 1998, 17), where reading and writing underpinned the establishment of an active religious public sphere of "learned scholars, schools of jurisprudence, and their support-

ers" who were "often autonomous from the official sphere of [their] rulers" (Eickelman and Anderson 2003a, 2). Emerging out of this ninth century public sphere was the work of an enormously popular social commentator and essayist by the name of al-Jahiz. After moving north from Basra, al-Jahiz spent much of his time embroiled in the lively civic culture that played out in the various bourgeois salons of Baghdad, where lengthy debate and lively conversation thrived as the people engaged with issues such as politics, social controversies, the conflict between faith and reason as well as sectarian and ethnic tensions (Braude 2003, 114). However, it was his unique ability to comment on and contribute to these debates in his elaborate and scholarly essays that ultimately won al-Jahiz wide acclaim.

This lively civic culture can be seen to have continued right through to the Ottoman sultans who generally believed that a strong, civilized state was a cosmopolitan one (Mostyn and Hourani 1988, 192). In fact, it was the Ottomans who first brought the wonders of press technology to Baghdad in the nineteenth century. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that a local news bulletin, *The Journal of Iraq*, existed in Baghdad as early as 1816 and was published in both Arabic and Turkish. It is thought that this paper mostly praised the local Ottoman governor (the paper's publisher), and was distributed to his army officials and other dignitaries. Although there are no surviving copies of *The Journal of Iraq*, if the reports are true it would have been the first time that news was reported in Arabic anywhere in the world (Ayalon 1995, 13). What is certain is that the Turkish press had been growing since as early as the appearance of *Takvim-I Vekayi* (the Turkish version of the French newspaper *Le Spectateur Oriental*) in 1831 (Lewis 1961, 93, 143-147) and when a progressive Ottoman *Vali* (governor) by the name of Midhat Pasha took the post in Baghdad in 1869, he brought with him the latest technology in the form of the printing press along with the zeal for modernization, both of which he had acquired during his previous post in Paris. Among his many achievements was the founding of the weekly newspaper, *Al-Zawra* ("the Curved [city]"—Baghdad), a four-paged Arabic-Turkish paper that preferred to extol the virtues of the sultan and the efficiency of the government than to report 'real' news (Ayalon 1995, 25). In the 1880s the *Vali*s of both Mosul and Basra followed Midhat Pasha's example, launching similar pro-Ottoman papers which have been noted for their primitive news-collecting methods and their poor Arabic translations (Ayalon 1995, 25-26).

The arrival of technologies such as the printing press—as well as other developments born out of the Industrial Revolution, including river steam navigation and the electric telegraph—heralded a fundamental shift in Iraq's political sphere. Over time these technological

developments led to a steady erosion of various elements of traditional Iraq, including the break up of many of the old loyalties and allegiances of the tribal order as well as the decline of the traditional economic structures of farming and other trades and the subsequent, if gradual, urbanization of the Iraqi population. These changes to the political, economic and social stratification of traditional Iraq witnessed the development of an urbane, middle-class intelligentsia who, in turn, provided the breeding ground for the myriad of Iraqi opposition parties and revolutionary movements (such as the Communists, the Baʿthists and the National Party) that would go on to have enormous impact on the political landscape of twentieth century Iraq (Batatu 1982, 22-24, 1113-1114). However, despite the development of an élite public sphere, Iraq did not see the immediate birth of a free and critical press during the late nineteenth century. Apart from two literary-religious journals published by the Carmelites in Baghdad and the Dominican missionaries of Mosul, any other attempts at establishing an independent press were "strictly and narrowly circumscribed by suspicious authorities" (Ayalon 1995, 62). This is not true of the entire region, as significant and critical journalistic movements arose in both Lebanon and Egypt at this time. However, when the Young Turks were able to successfully challenge the empire (Lewis 1994, 52), they set about establishing a constitutional government and restoring measures of autonomy to the various national-cultural entities within their governance (Shmuelevitz 2004, 28). They also went on to establish secular schools and liberalized the publications sector (Zubaida 2002, 209), effectively ushering in a series of rapid developments in the free press of the Middle East. By Iraq's first parliamentary election in 1908, there were, "no less than 44 new Arabic papers . . . in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq, as well as in Istanbul" (Ayalon 1995, 65). In subsequent years, press freedom was prevalent across Iraq, with the publication of not only papers in support of the ruling party in Istanbul, such as *Al-Zawra*, but also opposition papers including *Bayn al-Nahrayn* ("Mesopotamia," or more literally, "Between the Two Rivers") (Ayalon 1995, 66). In addition, Iraqis also had access to newspapers from Syria and Lebanon (Braude 2003, 144) as well as those from Istanbul, including anti-Young Turk papers like *Volkan* ("Volcano") (Lewis 1994, 110) and Zionist papers published by the Jewish community such as the weekly *Hamevasser* ("Herald") (Shmuelevitz 2004). Many of these newspapers and magazines of the Young Turk period were filled with long editorials praising the new era of tolerance and press freedom (Ayalon 1995, 65-66). Collectively, they have been described by one author as combining

a large measure of freedom with a high level of scholarship, contain[ing]

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> what are probably the best-informed and best-argued discussions that
> have yet occurred between conservatives and modernists and between
> the different groups within each camp (Lewis 1994, 111).

This brought with it a strong augmentation of Iraq's culture of public
debate and criticism as is best evidenced by the atmosphere surround-
ing Iraq's 1912 election, where "Iraqis witnessed for the first time [the
phenomenon] of party competition among the candidates" (Al-Wardi as
cited in Dawisha 2005, 12). During this period, even those too poor to
afford newspapers would line up at street-side newsvendors to rent a
paper or share with others. In total, this period led to the founding of 355
newspaper and journals across the Ottoman Empire, including seventy
independent newspapers in Iraq alone (Ayalon 1995, 65). However, this
period was relatively short-lived and plagued by newspapers which
were published sporadically, shifted location and focus often, and var-
ied immensely in their quality. Furthermore, with the outbreak of the
First World War, the Ottomans began to impose strict censorship on all
print media throughout the empire. Save for two sporadic and privately-
owned papers (one in Baghdad, the other in Mosul), this ultimately led
to the closure of every newspaper in Iraq (Ayalon 1995, 67, 70-71).

Modern Iraq—the nation that we know today—resulted from the fall
of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. In the clan-
destine Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain and France moved into much of
what are now Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Israel, and carved up the region
into two zones of influence (L. Anderson and Stansfield 2004, 14; Dia-
mond 2005, 31; Keeble 1997, 86). The era of British occupation—which
began with their control of Basra from the start of the war and spread to
the entire nation of Iraq by the end of 1918—also brought with it an
unprecedented sense of Iraqi nationalism. The presence of a common
enemy meant that groups such as the Shi'ites and the Sunnīs banded
together for the first time in centuries, holding joint religio-political
meetings which culminated "in patriotic oratory and poetic thundering
against the English" (Batatu 1982, 23). Later, when the League of Nations
accorded the British a mandate over Iraq in 1920-1921 (L. Anderson and
Stansfield 2004, 14), these sentiments were echoed in the dramatic
upsurge of budding wordsmiths who produced independent papers
such as *Al-Istiqlāl* ("The Independence" of Najaf), *Al-Furāt* ("The
Euphrates") and *Al-Istiqlāl* ("The Independence" of Baghdad), which
openly criticized the occupation. Following this initial uproar, a number
of papers—some the unapologetic mouthpiece for a particular political
faction, others claiming to be independent—emerged for the sole pur-
pose of addressing Iraq's future and discussing the pros and cons of a
republican vs. a monarchical government (Ayalon 1995, 92).

Without too much concern for the opinions and attitudes expressed in these organs, the British hastily set about designing the nation-states of the modern Middle East. In 1921, the British united the three previously autonomous *Vilayet*s ("regions") of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul (Cordesman and Hashim 1997, 59-60, 71) and appointed Faisal I—the third son of the Sharif of Mecca—the first modern king of Iraq (L. Anderson and Stansfield 2004, 14; Zubaida 2002, 211). After having appointed Faisal, the British staged the first of modern Iraq's falsified experiments with democracy, a national referendum which garnered an impossible 96 percent endorsement of his rule (L. Anderson and Stansfield 2004, 14-15). The local authorities of the various provinces were infuriated, and clerics who had so adamantly called on Faisal to implement a parliament and a national constitution now delivered *fatwa*s banning their religious minions from partaking in the elections for the Constituent Assembly until such a time as the monarch yielded to the people's call for democratization, civil liberties and freedom of the press (Dawisha 2005, 13). Heeding these calls, Faisal did go on to establish a number of quasi-democratic reforms, including nation-building exercises such as the development of highly patriotic national school curricula (Batatu 1982, 25), a new constitution, an electoral law (L. Anderson and Stansfield 2004, 16-18), and a Parliament consisting of both a *Majlis al-Nuwwāb* ("Chamber of Deputies") and a *Majlis al-Aʿyān* ("Senate") in 1924 which lasted until 1958 (Dawisha 2005, 18).

Those who did ascend to positions of power under the new monarchy failed to garner any real public support, and seem to have been perpetually concerned with those who sought to undermine them (Kedourie 1994, 33). Indeed, this dissatisfaction with authority in Iraq led to the emergence of several opposition parties during these early days of political struggle in the fledgling nation. These opposition parties quickly set up their own newspapers which were instrumental in mobilizing more than ten thousand people as they demonstrated in front of the King's palace on the first anniversary of his ascension to the throne, demanding a representational government and an end to British interference in domestic issues. By the late 1920s, Iraq saw the emergence of a varied, if partisan, press which included *Al-ʿĀlam al-ʿArabī* ("The Arabic World"), *Al-Liwāʾ* ("The Standard") and *Al-Taqaddum* ("The Priority"), all of which supported the Progressive Party (*Hizb al-Taqaddum*); *Ṣadā al-ʿAhd* ("The New Echo") published by the Commitment Party (*Ḥizb al-ʿAhd*); *Al-ʿIrāq* ("The Iraq") from the oppositional People's Party (*Ḥizb al-Shaʿb*); and the highly esteemed *Al-Bilād* ("The Country") newspaper, published by Christians in Baghdad who were members of the Nationalist Fraternity Party (*Ḥizb al-Ikhāʾ al-Waṭanī*) (for further details on the newspapers published by these various political parties see Ayalon 1995, 93-

94; for an exhaustive chronicle on Iraq's political groups and their respective histories, see Batatu 1982; and for specific information on this era in Iraqi politics, see Dawisha 2005, 14-15).

What is clear here is that Iraqi politics of the 1920s was a complex matrix constituted by a myriad of tribal, political, religious and ethnic factions, each of which vied for influence and authority under the newly established monarchy. Although there is evidence of an egalitarian and democratic culture emerging during this period, it is dangerous to assume that this was always the case. Indeed, Iraq's political climate of this era was often violent, with one commentator describing it as "a wretched political architecture and constitutional jerry-building of the flimsiest and most dangerous kind" (Kedourie 1970, 239). Nonetheless, this era also witnessed an unprecedented diversity in Iraq's print sector, with the establishment of sixty-one papers between 1919 and 1933 (Dawisha 2005, 21). Sadly, many of these papers, like the political parties to which they belonged, folded within a couple of years. However, despite their short lifespan, these highly partisan papers were able to invigorate the Iraqi 'public sphere,' enabling 'rational-critical' debate in both the parliament and the streets of the nation.

With the signing of the Anglo-Iraqi treaty in 1930, Iraq finally emerged as an independent nation, although the British presence continued for some years. Sadly, the democratic and egalitarian steps taken during the 1920s were reneged and, in the 1930s,

> Iraqi politics were based on personal, family, and tribal loyalties. Hastily created political parties that disbanded just as quickly, and even parliament itself, were forums of secondary consequence, for it was clan alliances that were of primary importance, whether forged in or out of parliament or the parties . . . Old-style plotting involving local Shiʿite religious leaders, tribal chiefs, and the military proved infinitely more effective than the modern modes of political activity, including elections and the press (Ayalon 1995, 93).

This situation paved the way for a series of political coups between 1936 and 1941, most of which were violent and few cared for installing any semblance of legitimate democratic rule. Concurrently, this period in Iraq was also marred by a poor press. There were increases in censorship of those organs which openly criticized the government, while the general standard of reporting and the technical standard of the papers was particularly low, the literacy rate was also below average for the region, and the circulation of many papers was down (Ayalon 1995, 94-95). Despite this, there were several newspapers which emerged during the 1930s that warrant a mention, *Ṣadā al-Istiqlāl* ("Echo of Independence"),

and *Al-Ahālī* ("The People"), both published by the Iraqi Nationalist
Party (*Jamāʿat al-Ahālī*), *Ḥabazbūz* (a term from Iraqi folklore), a Baghdad
paper filled with political satire (Daragahi 2003, 50) and perhaps Iraq's
most successful, professional and well-respected paper of this era, *Azza -
man* ("Time"), published by an Iraqi Christian.

Although the Second World War did see actual, if limited, fighting in
Iraq, this war did not have anywhere near the impact on the Arab Mid-
dle East as the First World War. When the fighting began, the govern-
ment of Iraq placed the newspapers and magazines of the nation under
tight censorship laws in an attempt to curtail anti-British sentiment
(Dawisha 2005, 22). This, coupled with the severe economic conditions
throughout the war, had implications for Iraqi civil society and its free
press, with many of the smaller papers across the region folding accord-
ingly. However, with the cessation of the war, the Regent of Iraq, Prince
ʿAbd al-Ilah announced a return to the political life of the 1920s and the
lifting of the restrictions on the freedom of the press (Dawisha 2005, 15).
This brought with it an immediate upsurge in both the number and vari-
ety of political parties in Iraq, from pro-government, pro-British parties,
to centrist, right- and left-leaning parties, and even two Marxist parties
(Dawisha 2005, 15-16). Once again, many of these parties spawned their
own publications. The Independence Party's (*Ḥizb al-Istiqlāl*) produced
"The Independent Standard" (*Liwāʾ al-Istiqlāl*), while The National
Democratic Party (*Al-Ḥizb al-Waṭanī al-Dīmuqrāṭī*) published "The Voice
of the People" (*Ṣawt al-Ahālī*—a reincarnation of *Al-Ahālī* after it had
been banned from publishing under its original name) (Dawisha 2005,
15-16, 22-23). It appears that, on the whole, the newspapers were rela-
tively free to express diverse opinions, particularly when compared to
the press in those regions still controlled by the British and the French.

One commentator goes on to compare the Arab press of this era to
that of the press which followed the American Revolution, in so far as it
was dominated by "the numerous, tiny enterprise, highly partisan,
political party press" (McFadden 1953, 36-37). Despite the fact that as
late as 1947, only eleven percent of Iraqis over the age of five were liter-
ate (Ayalon 1995, 95), McFadden was optimistic regarding not only the
gradual increase in journalistic standards of the Middle Eastern press,
but its role in future political developments. To a large extent this opti-
mism was justified given the happenings of the years that immediately
followed. In 1948, when the Iraqi government was about to sign a revi-
sion to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1930 (which appeared to bring Iraq fur-
ther into line with British interests in the nation), the Iraqi opposition
were virulent in their dissent, using their newspapers to encourage mas-
sive demonstrations on the streets of Baghdad. Sadly, however, the
power of the press proved too much for the ruling elite, and they there-

fore implemented a ban on a "number of these papers, and to increase the censorship on what they were able to write" (Dawisha 2005, 22).

The tide turned somewhat with the introduction of new media technologies to the region throughout the 1950s. Indeed, radio, television and further developments in the print media seemed to bring with them unprecedented media pervasiveness in the Middle East, if not always media freedoms. In Iraq, the nation's first television station went to air in 1956 (the same year as Sweden, see Daragahi 2003, 47), ushering in a new interest in the media, if only for the novel pleasures that such a visual medium could provide.

In 1958, Abdul Karim Qasim—a senior military officer and friend to many Iraqi opposition groups—coordinated the bloody coup d'état which disposed of the monarchy, and he became Iraq's prime minister. Despite the fact that Iraq at this time had an illiteracy rate of approximately 85 percent (Batatu 1982, 34), under Qasim's authority the heavily partisan newspapers of Iraq continued to enjoy considerable autonomy and popularity. However, Qasim did offer particular support to the rising ranks of the Communist Party (Batatu 1982, 35) and, by 1962, there were twenty newspapers in Baghdad, approximately one-third of which had pro-Communist tendencies (Rugh 2004, 46-47).

Qasim's leadership was short-lived, however, as three brothers, the nephews of the deposed King Faisal, coordinated another coup d'état which saw the establishment of the Arif regime. Each of the Arif brothers served as Iraq's leader in quick succession between 1963 and 1968, and the first—Colonel Abdul Salam Arif—is credited with beginning the Arab Socialist Union (for more on the Arif regime, see Batatu 1982, 1027-1072). Ironically, it was elements of this party which were to go on and form the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party (ABSP) and usurp the Arif brothers' reign. In addition, the Arif period also saw the passing of Press Law No. 53, which enabled heavy censorship of the press and tight control of media licenses (Rugh 2004, 50). Despite the authoritarian leadership of the Arif regime, Iraqis were still surprisingly politically active throughout this period. Once again, the political, religious, ethnic and tribal lines that maladroitly divided the nation were overtly political, with each group striving to ascend the hierarchy and establish themselves at the fulcrum of state authority in Baghdad. Even so, there were some minor developments in the media sector, including the launch of an Iraqi English-language paper to serve the growing expatriate community, *The Baghdad Observer* (Hurrat and Leidig 1994, 98-99).

The media under the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party and the rule of Saddam Hussein

Unfortunately, the political climate fostered under the Arif Regime did

little to encourage the establishment of moderate and legitimate political movements, and arguably paved the way for the violent military coup d'état in which the Arab Ba'th Socialist Party (ABSP) claimed authority in 1968 (Daragahi 2003, 46; Seymour 2004, 355). During this time there was a brief struggle for power between the two allies in the coup, the military and the Ba'th, with each of these bodies controlling one of the two major newspapers in Iraq at that time, *Al-Thawra* ("The Revolution") and *Al-Jumhūriyya* ("The Republic"), respectively (Bengio 2004, 110). This struggle for power was promptly decided in favour of the Ba'th, and served as a valuable lesson for the party regarding the power of the press.

They acted quickly. One of the Ba'th Party's first acts was to jail, charge and then execute Abdul Aziz Barakat, who was both the head of the Journalist's Union and the publisher of *Al-Manār* ("The Beacon" or "The Lighthouse"—not to be confused with today's Hezbollah-controlled television station of the same name), one of the most professionally-run and widely-distributed dailies in Iraq at the time (Daragahi 2003, 46, 50). Following this, in 1969 the Ba'th Party established a publications law which effectively made the media the fourth branch of the newly established government (Braude 2003, 146). This saw the Iraqi media industry quickly transform into one that was "more controlled, monolithic, mobilised and almost completely stripped of any critical approach" (Bengio 2004, 110). By 1974-75 this meant that although Iraq had a literacy rate of 30 percent (Rugh 1979, 3), it had only five daily newspapers, each of which was heavily influenced, if not completely controlled by, the state. These papers were *Al-Jumhūriyya*, *Al-Thawra*, *The Baghdad Observer*, the state-sanctioned paper of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, *Al-Taʾākhī* ("The Brotherhood") and the Communist party organ, *Ṭarīq al-Shaʿb* ("The Path of the People") (Rugh 1979, 32).

However, if the lack of an egalitarian political culture and a free press had been evident since the Ba'th ascension to power, it was to further deteriorate following the "self-election" of the late Saddam Hussein to the presidency of Iraq in 1979. It is now well known that Saddam's rise to power "was marked by terror, coercion and purges of Ba'th party members" (Seymour 2004, 355), that he went on to commit grievous crimes against his own citizens, especially the many religious and ethnic minorities of Iraq (Cordesman and Hashim 1997, 111-118), and that he was one of the cruellest and most tyrannical despots of modern times. What is perhaps less well known is that Saddam was also a powerful and charismatic politician, a master of a rhetoric that appealed directly to the "everyday Iraqi" and an expert at image management (for more on this, see Bengio, 1998). Indeed, having witnessed firsthand the role of the media during the ascension of the Ba'th Party to power a little over

a decade earlier, Saddam was all too aware of the power of the press and quickly set about modelling them after other twentieth century totalitarian examples, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Although the nation retained its five daily newspapers under Saddam's rule, he was quick to quash any lingering notions of freedom of the press by making sure that the entire media industry was folded under the authority of the government (Hurrat and Leidig 1994, 107). This meant that each of Iraq's papers soon became state-run propaganda instruments, dutifully reciting official policy and praising governmental action (Dawisha 2004, 14). He ensured that this occurred through rigorous and clandestine monitoring of the media, as well as more banal and overt practices such as insisting that his photograph be featured daily on the front page and that each of his speeches was printed in full (Braude 2003, 139-140). Saddam was also careful to minimize exposure to outside media by periodically jamming news broadcasts from outside of Iraq (Cordesman and Hashim 1997, 120) and imposing a five-year prison sentence for owning a satellite dish (Braude 2003, 150).

During the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88, Saddam made further inroads in limiting press freedom across Iraq. In 1986 he passed both Press Act 206 and Decree Number 804. The first of these prohibited Iraqi journalists from writing articles on twelve specific subjects, including any criticism of the President and his policies (Cordesman and Hashim 1997, 120), while the second made such criticisms punishable by death (Daragahi 2003, 46). It appears that Saddam made concerted efforts to point out the tremendous role that the media played during times of war. Indeed, he appears to have seen the media as an essential part of Iraq's military machine, dubbing them the 'information corps' (Bengio 2004, 110). Immediately after the war, however, Saddam was faced with thousands of men returning from the frontline to an Iraq that had no employment opportunities awaiting them. Many of these citizens—particularly the already disenfranchised Shi'ites and Kurds living in a Sunni controlled state—began to revolt against Saddam's authority and called for democratic reforms (Keeble 1997, 12). Surprisingly, Saddam endorsed this movement, seemingly because he believed that some form of public debate over democracy would enable his citizens to voice their grievances without subverting his authority. In line with other authoritarian leaders (Dahl 1998, 10) Saddam set about labelling himself "the engineer of democracy" or "the shepherd of democracy," although he failed to clearly detail what his actual approach to democracy was and how this would be implemented (Bengio 1998, 60-62). This had a parallel impact on the journalistic profession where those tired of toeing the official party line began—albeit subtly—to call for democratic reform and to challenge and criticize various aspects of public life under Saddam (Ben-

gio 2004, 117-118).

However, with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War, these meagre efforts at democratizing Iraq's media were quashed. Although much has been written about the Western coverage of this war—particularly its status as a "clean" war of spectacle, propaganda and illusion, little is known about the Iraqi press of this period. It can be assumed, however, that Saddam continued to maintain a tight control over his 'information corps,' using it to promote his actions and damn those of his enemies. What is known for sure is that immediately following the Gulf War, Iraq was placed under heavy sanctions from the international community (Herring 2004; Simons 1998) as well as internal pressure to democratize. This led Saddam to conduct mock elections in the hope of placating a public that had now endured twenty-three years of Ba'th rule and two wars. Firstly, Saddam's eldest son, Uday Hussein was "unanimously elected" to the position of the Head of the Journalist's Union in 1992, leaving him in charge of several newspapers, a radio station and responsible for the censorship and management of the rest of the nation's media (Daragahi 2003, 47). Specifically, there were six official daily newspapers which all came under the jurisdiction of the newly appointed Uday. There was *Al-Thawra*, *Al-Jumhūriyya* and *The Baghdad Observer*, all of which had survived since the early days of the Ba'th regime. In addition, Iraq's media landscape also contained *Al-ʿIrāq*, the official state-run Kurdish newspaper, Uday Hussein's own personal paper *Bābil* (established in 1990, it occasionally featured opinion editorials critical of "incompetent" government officials) and *Al-Qādisiyya* (a military paper which hit the newsstands during the Iran-Iraq War and was shrewdly named after a battle in 637 AD in which the Arabs defeated the Persians) (Hurrat and Leidig 1994, 98-99).

The result of having his son in such a prestigious position was that Saddam could continue to manipulate the media at will. Indeed, one of the continuing traits of the Ba'thist press was its role in tarnishing the image of an ongoing succession of 'others'. At times, this meant turning the media against factions of the citizenry, especially the Kurds or the Shi'ites, or against regional enemies such as Iran and Kuwait, global superpowers such as the United States or the West in general, and, almost without interruption, against Israel (Bengio 2004, 111-112). Uday's appointment also allowed Saddam to reward sycophantic journalists who were prepared to sacrifice their journalistic integrity for a career that rapidly ascended the Ba'thist ladder. Although Saddam received much criticism in the expatriate Iraqi press after he was unsurprisingly "re-elected" as President of Iraq in the 1992 sham election (Rugh 2004, 64), the domestic press was understandably much more

supportive, with one commentator even receiving $2,500 and a Honda after having called for Saddam's continuation in office (Daragahi 2003, 47). Other examples of upwardly mobile journalists who toed the Ba'thist line include a Chaldean Christian by the name of Tariq Aziz, who began his political career as the editor of *Al-Thawra*, later received the post of Iraq's Foreign Minister during the 1991 Gulf War, and then served as Deputy Prime Minister until Saddam's overthrow in 2003 (for details on this and other examples, see Braude 2003, 146-147; and Rugh 2004, 8).

However, if the rewards were high for those whose journalism adhered tightly to Ba'thist doctrine and the leadership of Saddam, the punishment for those who did not was extreme. In 1991, a political commentator by the name of Aziz al-Sayed Jassem was arrested and later disappeared after refusing to write books that praised the President's leadership, while a prominent *Al-Thawra* journalist disappeared after criticizing articles in his own paper (Daragahi 2003, 46). In 1999, Uday went as far as personally firing one thousand writers for not praising the President with the required enthusiasm. In total, over 500 journalists, writers and intellectuals went missing or were executed during the rule of the Ba'th Party according to one French Human Rights organization, the International Alliance for Justice (as cited in Daragahi 2003, 46). In fact, Uday is said to have set up special prisons expressly designed for torturing and detaining Iraq's journalists and political dissidents (see for example the story of an Iraqi journalist by the name of Yunis, as retold in Epperlein and Tucker 2006). Even those journalists who attempted to bring humour to the autocracy of Saddam faced heavy penalties, with one writer arrested and then tortured for having written that Saddam cared about every last detail in Iraq, even the toilets (Whitaker 2003). On top of this, media audiences were also targeted, particularly in the autonomous Kurdish north where, despite the fact that it had developed something of a free press since its establishment in 1991, one man was reportedly sentenced to twenty-one years imprisonment after being found with a copy of a non-state Kurdish paper by the name of *Al-Ittiḥād* ("Unity") (Daragahi 2003, 46-48).

With such extreme punishment handed out to the journalists who were even remotely critical of the central authority in Baghdad, it is little wonder that Bengio describes the Iraqi media of this era as "an omnipotent propaganda machine" which "played the role of the Ba'th regime's watchdog, thus contributing significantly to its survival and longevity" (2004, 109-110). However, the state's abolishment of freedom of the press did not completely destroy the journalistic movement in Iraq. Many of those who desired to criticise Saddam and the Ba'th Party left the country and joined the growing ranks of the expatriate opposi-

tion press, while those who stayed were free to channel their talents and creativity into the means of conveying the official news to the populace (Braude 2003, 146). Others went even further. Journalism educators at Baghdad's College of Mass Media (which taught courses in print, photo, radio and TV journalism, and was the only school of journalism in the country, see Hurrat and Leidig 1994, 97) were renowned for teaching their students the fundamentals of good reporting accuracy, objectivity and the quest for truth. Journalists at *Nabḍ al-Shabāb* ("the Pulse of Youth"), the weekly Uday-controlled newspaper of the Youth Union, was able to candidly criticize the government and its strict control of the people, the actions of Tariq Aziz (the Deputy Prime Minister) and promote opposition figures such as Ahmad Chalabi before Saddam cracked down and the newspaper's staff were pushed out (Daragahi 2003, 47-48).

However, not even Saddam Hussein could have predicted the cataclysmic attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001. These events ushered in a seismic shift in global politics, perhaps best illustrated by US President George W. Bush's declaration of a "War on Terror" which started first in Afghanistan and then moved to Iraq. Despite the wealth of scholarship on both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and their coverage in the Western media, there appears to be very little research that details the coverage which appeared in the Iraqi press from September 11, 2001 to the fall of Baghdad in 2003. We do know that in 2002 Saddam conducted another of Iraq's sham elections, this time winning 100 percent of the vote (Rugh 2004, 34). It is also fairly safe to assume that, up until at least the beginning of the war, the official Iraqi press continued in its unwavering support for Saddam and its critique of those who might threaten his authority (there is no doubt that President Bush came under heavy fire for his stance against the "Axis of Evil" and his "War on Terror," while the "Coalition of the Willing" would have been criticized for their involvement). What we do know for sure is that the Iraqi Minister of Information, Mohammad Saʿid al-Sahhaf, continued to broadcast his versions of events throughout the war (Mirzoeff 2005, 77). Although he lost much of his credibility over the insistence that the Coalition troops were meeting fierce resistance (which incidentally made him something of an internet cult hero), he was credited with having provided much information on civilian deaths in Iraq to the media, which fuelled further resentment towards the war, particularly in the Arab world (Ravi 2005, 59, 61).

The rise of the print media in post-Saddam Iraq
With the fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, Iraq's media environment was

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changed forever. Nearly 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 with them an invaluable and divergent knowledge base gained from living in liberal democracies where they had no doubt witnessed firsthand the function of the Fourth Estate. The evidence of their fervent labour and newfound freedom was soon to be seen on the streets of Baghdad where, by the end of May 2003, approximately one hundred new publications and a few new broadcast outlets were available, while others were launched concurrently in Basra, Kirkuk and Mosul (Daragahi 2003, 46). Come the end of 2003, this number had grown to around two hundred Iraqi-owned news publications, and between fifteen and seventeen Iraqi-owned television stations (Gerth 2005; Zanger 2005, 107).

Given Iraq's long and complex political history, it is not at all surprising that these new media formats quickly became the forum for much of Iraq's political jousting and debate. Indeed, most of the newspapers were started by political parties and were partisan organs, geared towards their stated policies and agendas. However, the domestic politics of Iraq, with its myriad of religious and ethnic divides, do not neatly break down into a series of mutually exclusive groups. There are, as is now commonly known, three large ethno-religious groups in Iraq—the Shi'ite 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, Yazidis, Sabaeans, and others" (Batatu 1982, 13) (for details on the plight of Iraq's minorities today, see Isakhan 2005b). Within each of these broad categories are more intricate differences, with each sector capable of being further broken down into religious, ethnic and political sub-categories.

For example, it is often forgotten that the Kurds are largely Sunnis, but that there are also many Kurdish Christians and Kurdish Shi'ites. Beyond this, the Kurds can be further divided according to their allegiance to the two major Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP, founded by the legendary Mustafa Barzani in 1945 and now led by his son, Massoud Barzani) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, formed in 1975 and now led by the current President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani). However, Kurdish politics is complicated further by the presence of a number of other parties, including the Communist Party of

Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish Democratic Solutions Party, and the Islamic Group of Iraqi Kurdistan. Similarly, the Shiʿites (who have always been the majority in modern Iraq, but were long marginalized by the central Sunni-led government) can be understood according to their allegiance to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (which had been in staunch opposition of Saddam's rule from the safety of Iran) and the Islamic Daʿwa Party (led by former Iraqi Prime Minister, Ibrahim Al-Jaafari). There is also the highly influential Grand Ayatollah Sistani and a number of other pro-Shiʿite political and religious groups who hold significant clout. Iraq's smaller minority groups have also been active with the formation of the Iraqi National Movement, which represents Sunni Arabs (who ruled Iraq since its creation in the 1920s until the fall of Saddam, but only ever constituted approximately 20 percent of Iraq's diverse population) and the Turkoman Brotherhood Party. Beyond these parties are those that explicitly support singular political or religious ideologies. These include various Islamic political groups, several nationalistic parties, a number of Iraqi parties that claim to be liberal-democratic, and other political parties such as the Arab Socialists, the Iraqi Communist Party, the Royal Constitutional Movement, the Supreme Council for the Liberation of Iraq and the Pan-Arab Movement.

What is particularly interesting about these ethnic, religious and political groups is that each of them has produced their own newspaper since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Not surprisingly, these publications have been joined by those who claim to be free of such allegiances, including several liberal-democratic organs, those produced by collectives of journalists, independent publishing houses and others which promote peace and tolerance amid the ongoing violence. In addition, Iraq has also seen the production of several sports bulletins, arts and culture magazines, a few industry-related bulletins, 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; *The New Iraq Press*, 2003). Indeed, the demand for authentic news in Iraq has been so strong and the publication of all manner of papers so pervasive, that it has been increasingly difficult to keep track of many of them. It can be assumed that there are enormous variances in quality, life-span and readership between them, ranging from the highly sophisticated and professional organs read by a wide audience across the spectrum of the Iraqi population, to the short-lived, hackneyed efforts of clearly biased individuals pandering to a sympathetic few. There are, however, several that are worthy of more detailed analysis.

Amongst Iraq's burgeoning press scene are several pro-American daily newspapers that are run by associates of Ahmad Chalabi, including *Al-Muʾtamar* ("The Congress") (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005), *Al-Jamāhīr* ("The Masses") and *Al-Mawṣil* ("Mosul") (Rugh 2004, 116-117). In the 1990s Chalabi had formed part of the Iraqi National Congress, which had worked unsuccessfully with the US government to overthrow Saddam. In the lead up to the 2003 invasion, Chalabi supplied suspect information to the Bush administration regarding Iraq's alleged stockpile of WMD and later served as Iraq's interim deputy prime minister. At one point, Chalabi was the favourite of the Pentagon and it was assumed that he had popular support within Iraq and would easily ascend the political hierarchy to lead the nation (*Facts behind the smears*, 2004). However, Chalabi failed to win a single seat in Iraq's December 2005 elections, and today he is under investigation by several United States departments and remains wanted by the Jordanian authorities on allegations of bank fraud.

Other Iraqi expatriates also have a vested interest in Iraq's new media environment. During the 1980s and early 1990s, there were few journalists more adept at ascending the media hierarchy of Iraq than Saʿd al-Bazzaz. He held a succession of senior positions, including the editorship of *Al-Jumhūriyya*, the paper that had supported the Baʿth from as far back as 1968 and continued to extol its virtues throughout the reign of Saddam Hussein. In addition, his career also included managing the Iraqi National News Agency and the Ministry of Information, overseeing the production and broadcasting of all Iraqi radio and TV (Zengerle 2002). However, his disagreements with Saddam over quality control and his objection to the invasion of Kuwait led al-Bazzaz to defect to the United Kingdom in 1992. From London in 1997 al-Bazzaz began Iraq's only independent pan-Arab daily, *Azzaman* ("The Times"), which quickly grew to include international editions issued from Bahrain and North Africa. With the success of *Azzaman*, al-Bazzaz was able to expand his growing media empire to include "a monthly current-affairs magazine, a semi-annual culture magazine . . . and a number of books—ranging from Arabic translations of Jean-Paul Sartre to reportage on Afghanistan," (Zengerle 2002) all of which were highly esteemed as professional in both their content and production. However, this was not enough for al-Bazzaz, as he had long dreamed of returning to his homeland and distributing his publications throughout the media-impoverished landscape of Iraq. With the fall of Saddam in 2003, al-Bazzaz saw his opportunity and he started to distribute from Baghdad. The years in exile and the commitment to quality meant that *Azzaman* was an instant hit on the streets of Iraq, where it was the only full-colour 24-page daily which reported global, regional and local stories with a mildly Arab-nationalist tendency

(Daragahi 2003, 48). It quickly became Iraq's most widely-read newspaper, printing about 60,000 issues in Baghdad, and was able to support another office in Basra (*Iraq: Closure of Al-Arabiya News Channel* 2003). Not stopping here, al-Bazzaz—nicknamed the Rupert Murdoch of Iraq—has since ventured into television, developing *Al-Sharqiyya* ("The Eastern One") into Iraq's most-watched TV channel, hosting comedy and reality TV programs (Ciezadlo 2004).

In Iraqi Kurdistan, a well-educated and articulate man by the name of Ahmad Shawkat, who had once been imprisoned by Saddam, returned to Iraq before the war in the hope of finding work as a translator for the influx of foreign journalists entering the country (*Two Notable Books on Journalists in Iraq*, 2005). Luckily, Shawkat found Michael Goldfarb, a London correspondent for National Public Radio (US), and the two worked together in detailing the early stages of the war from the perspective of Kurdistan. Later, Shawkat was able to start his own non-partisan newspaper, *Bilattijāh* ("Without Direction," or perhaps, "Without Bias") which had the stated goal of fighting "for the building of a new Iraq and a civil society and a transparent democracy in a time of freedom" (Shawkat as cited in Zanger 2005, 108). Sadly, the damning editorials he wrote regarding the union that had formed between Islamic fundamentalists and former Ba'thists led to his assassination, and prompted Goldfarb to document his friend's eventful life and tragic death in *Ahmad's War, Ahmad's Peace: Surviving Under Saddam, Dying in the New Iraq* (Goldfarb 2005).

As well as expatriates and exiled Iraqis, others were keen to harness Iraq's new-found media freedom and the people's thirst for unadulterated news. Among them was the crew assembled by two young college students at the American University of Beirut, Ralph Hassall (British) and David Enders (American). On a brave whim and a shoestring budget they made it into Iraq and set up the *Baghdad Bulletin*, the nation's only non-partisan English-language paper whose first edition appeared in June 2003 (Thomsen 2004, 124). What differentiated the *Baghdad Bulletin* from other Iraqi papers of the time was not only that it was published in English, but that it was most likely the only publication that was both read by and featured articles submitted from both sides: members of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the (English-reading/writing) Iraqi population. In the first issue, Enders editorialized that "Inevitably, a civil society will be born out of the [current] uncertainty [in post-war Iraq]. A necessary part of such a society is a free press" (Enders as cited in Thomsen 2004, 125). To achieve this lofty goal, the young crew of the *Baghdad Bulletin* employed and trained as many willing Iraqis as they could find (Enders 2003). Unfortunately, however, the paper's slim budget quickly vanished, and due to Iraq's weak domestic advertising market, the *Bagh -*

dad Bulletin's publication was suspended in September 2003 after only seven issues. Many of the staff since went on to work for some of the world's leading media organizations, while Enders documented his experiences in his book, *Baghdad Bulletin: Dispatches on the American Occupation* (Enders 2005).

Perhaps the most telling sign of the end of Saddam's brutal monopoly over the nation of Iraq and its media has been the re-launch of *Al-Manār*. In the coup of 1968 when the Baʿth Party seized control of Iraq, *Al-Manār* was promptly shut down and its publisher, Abdul Aziz Barakat (who was also the head of Iraq's journalist's union) was arrested and later executed. Prior to this, *Al-Manār* had an exceptional reputation and was widely considered Iraq's most professional and objective paper. In the new Iraqi media landscape one of Barakat's former pupils, the seventy-year-old Taha Arif Muhammad mustered together a crew of forty journalists from across Iraq, setting up bureaus in Hilla, Karbala, Najaf, Basra, Kirkuk and Mosul. Due to the fact that the telecommunications infrastructure is still poor in today's Iraq, these journalists send their stories to Baghdad via courier and, when printed, *Al-Manār* has a circulation of approximately 15,000 (Daragahi 2003, 50).

In addition to the successful re-emergence of *Al-Manār* has been that of *Ḥabazbūz,* an organ filled with political satire and which was last published in Iraq in 1932. After having graduated from Baghdad's College of Mass Media, Ashtar Ali Yasseri worked for one of Uday's tightly controlled papers, *Al-Zawra*, where she honed her skills toeing the line of the Baʿthist regime. Seeing the lighter side of post-Saddam Iraq, Yasseri decided to revive the organ which had best satirized the British occupation of the 1920s and 30s, *Ḥabazbūz.* Commenting on her illustrated weekly which frequently takes pot-shots at the US occupation, Yasseri stated "This is the best time for this kind of newspaper . . . It's good to make fun of things. It feels good to laugh" (Yasseri as cited in Daragahi 2003, 50).

Other newspapers which have emerged include *Al-Madā* ("The View" or "The Orbit"), which is commonly considered to be Iraq's highbrow newspaper, publishing both investigative reports of a professional standard and cultivating Iraqi's fondness for literature by publishing Arabic poetry (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005). However, the ownership of *Al-Madā* is unclear, with competing claims that it is another of Chalabi's US-backed papers (*Facts behind the smears*, 2004) versus those that claim it is the mouthpiece of Muqtada al-Sadr, the son of the Shiʿite leader, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, who was executed by Saddam's agents in 1999 (Rosen 2004). There is also *Al-Sāʿa* ("The Hour"), a semi-weekly published by Uday Hussein's former personal assistant, Adeeb Shabaan, who was imprisoned during the final days of Saddam's

regime for his disagreements with Uday (Daragahi 2003, 49). Finally, as has already been mentioned, Iraq's media sector extends out from these examples to include those papers which speak for all manner of religious, ethnic and political persuasions, covering the diverse and nuanced interests of this complex nation.

As is to be expected, there are many problems that go along with such a divergent, ad hoc and highly volatile media landscape. First and foremost, the media in Iraq is operating outside of an appropriate legal framework. Despite some early attempts to establish the parameters of a free and independent press in post-Saddam Iraq, such as a conference attended by various figures from Iraq's media sector in Athens in 2003 (Daragahi 2003, 50), these have proven relatively unsuccessful. The issue of the legal framework for Iraq's emerging media sector aside, employment as a journalist is still an extremely dangerous profession in Iraq as US occupation, foreign insurgents and sectarian strife continue to ravage the country. Recently, the Iraqi Journalists Association (IJA) and the Arab Press Freedom Watch (APFW) have called on the newly-appointed government in Baghdad to take greater security measures for the protection of journalists. As part of its request, the IJA cited that 112 Iraqi journalists and media workers had been killed since March 2003 (*Iraq: Local journalists call for increased protection*, 2006), let alone the countless others who have been harassed, wounded, imprisoned and tortured.

Beyond the impact that these dangers continue to have on the day-to-day lives of the citizens of Iraq and their media sector are the influences of the many foreign powers—particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Great Britain. Each of these has their own vested interests in the situation and evolving politics of Iraq, largely due to its vast reserves of oil but also because of its geographical location and the myriad of religious and ethnic sects that are vying for power. This has meant that, in addition to the above, some of Iraq's recent media developments have openly served as a mouthpiece for these foreign powers. The religio-political papers, *Al-ʿAdāla* ("The Justice") and *Nahrayn* ("Two Rivers") are a case-in-point as they are Shiʿite papers openly published and distributed by the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (Daragahi 2003, 49; Rugh 2004, 117). More discreetly, the Saudi Arabian government—which has invested heavily in various pan-Arab organs across the region—are believed to be funding Saʿd al-Bazzaz's *Azzaman* franchise, including Iraq's highest rating TV channel, *Al-Sharqiyya* (*Iraqi Independent Media Mogul Accused of Running Saudi-funded covert Propaganda Operation*, 2005).

However, the efforts of the Iranians and the Saudis pale in comparison to those of the United States. In fact, shortly after the fall of Baghdad in 2003, the Bush administration poured millions into the development

of the Iraqi media (Gerth 2005). While this money has certainly helped in developing papers that range from explicitly pro-US to non-partisan (such as *Al-Muʾtamar* and *Bilattijāh* respectively), it has also been used to shut down those papers which directly challenged the strategic interests of the CPA. Under the leadership of Lewis Paul Bremmer III, the CPA, on behalf of the United States government, issued "Order Number 14: Prohibited Media Activity," which deemed any publication that "incites violence . . . incites civil disorder . . . incites violence against Coalition Forces or CPA personnel . . . advocates alterations to Iraq's borders" or "advocates the return of the Iraqi Baʿth Party" as illegal (Bremmer 2003, 1-2). The penalties for breaking such prohibitions were severe, including detainment, arrest and prosecution, with a sentence of up to one year in prison, while in "emergencies" the Coalition Forces were permitted to "take direct action to prevent or defeat the threat" (Bremmer 2003, 2). Indeed, the US forces were not reluctant to take such "direct action." In 2003, *Al-Mustaqilla* ("The Independent") was shut down by the CPA and the managing editor, Dhari al-Duleimi, was arrested after publishing an article that claimed the killing of those who cooperate with the CPA was a religious duty (Brahimi 2003). This was followed in 2004 by the closure of *Al-Ḥawza* (the name of a particular Shiʿite seminary), another newspaper accused of being the mouthpiece of Muqtada al-Sadr and terminated for the publication of articles such as "America Hates Islam and Muslims" (Al-Sheikh 2004; Gettleman 2004; Rosen 2004). The Baghdad office of the popular pan-Arab TV station *Al-ʿArabiyya* ("The Arab") was also closed down and its journalists banned from working in Iraq for an indefinite period following the screening of a tape that saw Saddam urge Iraqis to resist the US occupation (*Iraq: Closure of Al-ʿArabiyya News Channel*, 2003).

Well before the CPA seized control of Iraq, the US and UK had inaugurated a new Iraqi satellite TV station named *Naḥwa al-Ḥurriyya* ("Towards Freedom") (Rutherford 2004, 60). Launched by personal messages from both US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the station was beamed into Iraq from a purpose-built Commando Solo aeroplane ('*Towards Freedom TV': A Channel Targeting the Iraqis, launched by Messages from Blair and Bush*, 2003). On the ground, the United States spent much money and effort to resurrect both Saddam's Ministry of Information and his International News Agency (INA), which were all but destroyed by both the bombing of Baghdad and the ensuing looting that ravaged many public institutions (*Coalition Forces Bombard Iraqi State TV*, 2003). The Ministry of Information was renamed the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) by the CPA (Rugh 2004, 116), and it now consists of *Al-ʿIrāqiyya* ("The Iraqi"), a national TV station modelled on the BBC, both the *Al-Ṣabāḥ* ("The Morning") and *Al-Sūmir*

("The Sumerian"—published in Kuwait for distribution in Iraq) news-papers and at least one radio station. Around 90 percent of IMN's staff are former Ministry of Information employees (McCaul 2003) who seem to be revelling in the opportunity to report the news without the menacing auspices of Saddam and his son, Uday. However, despite this, there are a number of concerns about the IMN and its clear prejudice towards the US occupation (Gourevitch 2003), with the independent Iraqi Media Assessment Report (IMAR) recommending that, due to its ties to the CPA, the IMN should be "dismantled and the constituent parts all located within independent institutions" (McCaul 2003). The INA on the other hand, was resurrected and re-named the National Iraqi News Agency (NINA) by Dr Farid Ayar, who had been an INA journalist before leaving Iraq in the 1990s. Today, Ayar is a member of the Iraqi Independent Electoral Commission, and despite claims that NINA "does not have any links with any official or unofficial party, it will be self-financing to ensure its independence and it does not rely on any foreign financing sources" (*NINA: A New Iraqi News Agency*, 2005), it was originally established by the US-funded International Research and Exchange Board (IREX).

Other United States involvement in Iraq's fledgling media environment has been more sinister and clandestine. It has long been known that the United States conducted its extensive Psychological Operations ("PsyOps") campaign throughout the 1990s under the Clinton administration (Myers 1999; Sussman 2005) and that it was extended well in advance of the Coalition invasion of 2003 (Clark and Christie 2005; Rutherford 2004, 55-60; Taylor 2003). However, it has only recently come to light that this same operation has since been responsible for covertly planting pro-US news stories in the Iraqi press. In mid-2004, a company by the name of the Lincoln Group formed a partnership with the Rendon Group (which had earlier been hired by Washington to help counter Taliban propaganda in the Afghanistan war) (Gerth 2005). Together they were awarded a $100 million dollar contract by the Pentagon to continue "strategic communications" in Iraq (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005; *U.S. war propaganda carries on*, 2006). Part of this operation entailed covertly running more than 1,000 news articles in twelve to fifteen of Iraq's news-papers at a cost of between $40 and $2,000 per item (Gerth 2005). These stories were mainly written by US soldiers who were part of the "Information Operations" program, and then translated into Arabic by the Lincoln Group's Iraqi staff who later posed as wealthy freelancers, offering the shoestring Iraqi press money in exchange for publication (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005; *U.S. war propaganda carries on*, 2006). It was never disclosed to the papers that these articles—which were typically written from an Iraqi perspective and purposefully designed to cater to

specific ethnic or religious groups (such as Shiʿites or Kurds) and to address key issues (including terrorism or democracy) —were actually the cleverly-disguised propaganda of the occupying force. Although papers such as the pro-American *Al-Muʾtamar* did not seem too concerned about their publication of such articles, others, such as the editor of the well-respected *Al-Madā*, understandably expressed his outrage (Mazzetti and Daragahi 2005), while an editorial in *Azzaman* deemed such actions a blatant attempt "to humiliate the independent national press" of Iraq (Gerth 2005).

The irony here barely needs to be stated. The Bush administration has been adamant that the proliferation of democracy around the globe, and particularly across the Middle East, is central to its broader geo-political agenda (see the first State of the Union Address of Bush's second term in 2005). Yet, at the same time, they are undermining one of the hallmarks of Iraq's emergent democracy—its free and independent press—both by developing state media services such as the IMN which openly serve US purposes, and by undermining via more clandestine methods the independence of those media organs who do not.

Unfortunately, the interference in Iraq's media sector is not limited to those governments which exist outside its borders. Despite the fact that the Iraqi Constitution—finalized by the Iraqi National Assembly in August 2005 and ratified by the people of Iraq in October of that same year—guarantees "Freedom of press, printing, advertisement, media and publication" (*The Iraqi Constitution*, 2005), the Iraqi media industry has continued to suffer since the establishment of the Iraqi Government. This has included prison sentences of one and a half years for criticizing senior figures such as the Kurdish Governor, Massoud Barzani (*APFW Alert: APFW Condemns the Verdict Against Kamal Sayed Qader*, 2006), the arrest and detention of other Iraqi journalists (*APFW Calls for the Release of Iraqi Journalist*, 2006), as well as bashings and harassment by Iraqi police (*APFW Denounces the Aggression on Al Hurra Reported by Iraqi Police*, 2006). These situations have led some papers, such as *Al-Shahīd al-Mustaqill* ("The Independent Martyr") to a self-imposed temporary cessation in publication (*Iraq: Al Shahid al Mustaqel Stops publishing in Response to Governmental Practices*, 2006), while others have been forced to close, including the Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera for one month for allegedly inciting violence and hatred amongst the Iraqi people (*IFJ Accuses Iraq of "Unacceptable and Illogical Censorship" Over Ban on Al-Jazeera*, 2004; *Iraq Shuts Al-Jazeera Baghdad Office for a Month*, 2004). More recently, the Iraqi Parliament urged Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to close down Saʿd al-Bazzaz's media empire—including both the *Azzaman* newspaper and the *Al-Sharqiyya* television station—under allegations that they were too critical of a recent draft law that proposed turning

Iraq into a federal state (*Parliament asks government to close Azzaman*, 2006).

In addition to these problems are reports that the quality and professionalism of the Iraqi press is highly dubious. As Zanger has pointed out, "nearly all [Iraqi] papers trade in street rumour, conspiracy theories, and endless editorial comment, often based not on fact but bias, misconceptions and wild innuendo" (2005, 107). These papers have also been criticized for the quality of their written Arabic, which is said to be below professional standards, while the articles themselves often fail to meet the basic journalistic criteria of objectivity and accuracy (Whitaker 2003). There are also parallels being drawn to examples such as Algeria of the 1980s and Yemen of the 1990s, where political changes led to an eruption of political parties and a thriving media sector. Unfortunately, in both of these cases, the progress was short-lived and within a few years the number, diversity and critical approach of these papers dwindled considerably (Whitaker 2003). The same is expected of Iraq, particularly if the domestic economy—which was already significantly eroded due to twelve years of sanctions prior to the war—does not escalate to levels where considerable advertising revenue can be generated (Daragahi 2003, 50).

However, despite all of this, there is reason to be optimistic. Thirty-five years of Ba'thist rule and its tight restrictions on the media has left in its wake an Iraqi population that has developed an "abysmal distrust of official news" (Bengio 2004, 109) and is skilled in navigating carefully-crafted propaganda (Braude 2003, 141-142). This can be seen in the fact that most Iraqis have exercised their right to eschew the US-backed media in favour of the local, independent press. As Mirzoeff notes, the people of Iraq have "steadfastly refused to watch Iraqi Media Network, the US official television station, seeing it as simply more propaganda" (2005, 76). Beyond this, even former employees of the Lincoln Group have noted that the broader 'PsyOps' program, despite its enormous cost, was largely ineffective due to the fact that Iraqis knew the content was American (Gerth 2005; *U.S. war propaganda carries on*, 2006). Even the uncovering of the Lincoln Group's association with the Pentagon and their collective strategy of planting pro-US news items in the independent Iraqi press was "met mostly with shrugs in Baghdad, where readers tend to be sceptical about the media" (Gerth 2005).

Conclusion

Iraq's relationship with the written word can be seen to go back as far as writing itself. It began when the complex societies of the Bronze Age prompted the development of a written language known as cuneiform. At first this language was used to document the mechanisms of trade

and commerce, but it evolved to include a rich literary catalogue and to detail an egalitarian and collective political structure. Later, following the introduction of Islam, cities such as Baghdad became known for their burgeoning public sphere constituted by a myriad of talented poets, writers and scholars who frequented the bourgeois salons that dotted the capital. This lively civic culture was later fostered by the Ottomans and, at least as far back as 1869, Iraq witnessed the mass communication opportunities afforded by the modern printing press. This new technology, coupled with the liberties granted by the Young Turks, ushered in a new era of unprecedented press freedom in the region, which served to augment Iraq's culture of public debate and criticism.

With the advent of modern Iraq under the auspices of the British following the end of the First World War came a thriving debate over the future of this fledgling nation. Here, Iraq's many newspapers were central to propagating this discussion, providing a voice to the myriad of political, religious and ethnic factions competing for influence under the newly-installed monarchy. As Iraq emerged as an independent nation in 1930, it unfortunately witnessed its own political climate descend into a succession of coups d'état that led to a highly censored and controlled media sector. Following the Second World War and through much of the 1950s, however, Iraq witnessed a return to a vigorous public sphere constituted by a number of organs that were unprecedented in their professionalism and popularity. Unfortunately, this era was short-lived and another series of coups d'état in the 1960s eventually led to the ascension of the Ba'th Party in 1968 and the subsequent "self-elected" presidency of Saddam Hussein beginning in 1979, where Iraq's political culture and free press deteriorated substantially. Saddam's brutal grip over what he termed the 'information corps' meant that any lingering notions of press freedom and objectivity held by idealistic journalists was soon quashed.

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. Once again, Iraq's complex matrix of political, religious and ethnic allegiances unfolded across the pages of the nations press. Many of these newly-formed papers were understandably biased towards particular segments of Iraq's population, following certain agendas and proliferating particular ideologies. Others maintained a high level of objectivity and journalistic integrity, revelling in their newfound freedom to practice their profession and their chance to connect with a population thirsty for authentic news.

More recently, reports have surfaced regarding the extensive interference that foreign entities have caused upon Iraq's developing media sector. Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and even the newly-established Iraqi government all stand accused of having used both overt and clandestine methods to suppress the freedom of the Iraqi press.

However, there is still reason to be optimistic about the role that Iraq's thriving media environment can play as the Fourth Estate in the resurrection of Iraq's public sphere. Firstly, Saddam's tight control over the media sector left a population that is savvy to the intricacies of propaganda and capable of navigating through 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 (for more details on the Iraqi elections of 2005, see Isakhan 2005a, 2006a). 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 that littered Iraq in the lead up to these elections fulfilled their duty of informing the populace as to the central issues facing the nation and the stances taken by the many political parties emerging across Iraq. This resurgence of the Iraqi citizenship playing an active role in their own governance, as well as their engagement with a free press, is crucial to the development of an informed and active public sphere.

Much, therefore, rests on the shoulders of Iraq's fledgling media sector. The ability of Iraq's press to accurately report both on the events and struggles of modern Iraq and to serve as the forum of varied deliberation, debate and discourse is critical to the survival of its nascent public sphere. In turn, this public sphere is central to the mobilization of an informed and politically active Iraqi population. A free and independent Iraqi press is not only crucial in re-establishing a participatory and engaged public sphere, but it can also help to abate the many conflicts across Iraq and thereby aid the shift towards a free, egalitarian and democratic future.

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