



# Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Iraq case study

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This project is funded by the European Union

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This report is part of a wider project, led by the International Centre for Counter- Terrorism (ICCT) – the Hague, and funded by the EU Devco on “Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism”. This project aims to produce evidence-based guidance and capacity building outputs based on original, context-sensitive research into the risks and opportunities in media reporting of terrorism and terrorist incidents. The role of media reporting on terrorism has been under investigated and is an underutilised dimension of a holistic counter-terrorism strategy. How the media reports on terrorism has the potential to impact counter-terrorism (CT) perspective positively or negatively.



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## Key Findings

- The influence of the Pan Arab Television stations on Iraqi journalists impacted the way they covered the stories for local television stations.
- The impact of those channels reshaped the local media and the way Iraqis look at news coverage.
- The influence of those channels on how local journalists and editors cover terror attacks and their aftermath.
- The lessons learnt from covering terror events in Iraq are highlighted here, with the potential to be used in analysis on other Arab countries.

## Introduction

During Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraq had only two terrestrial television stations, both run by the government. Their content was heavily censored and the government tightly controlled what Iraqi citizens could see. Moreover, the majority of Iraqis did not have access to satellite channels and most were banned from travelling outside the country. Iraq was also largely closed off from the outside world in terms of news and information. State control of the information ecosystem was part of a totalitarian system that encompassed the whole of Iraqi society – there was no freedom of expression, and severe penalties for those who digressed from the government line.

In the days after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, in Iraqi cities trucks loaded with satellite dishes were a common sight, and before long, a satellite could be seen on almost every roof in Iraq's cities. A year later, twenty-one new national channels were beaming across the country, and there were 150 independent newspapers and eighty radio stations<sup>1</sup>. Business, political and religious leaders all scrambled to harness the power of the media, with many elite figures opening their own new channels. But despite this vibrant – or chaotic – media landscape, the Gulf-based satellite channels, Al-Jazeera (based in Qatar and funded by the Qatari government) and Al-Arabiya (based in Dubai but close to, and now part-owned by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), attracted large audiences<sup>2,3</sup>.

This paper analyses Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's coverage of terrorism in Iraq from 2003 to the present. Primary sources for this research were examples of television reports on terrorist incidents and threats, and interviews with key informants. Where appropriate, links to news reports have been given in order to further understand any conclusions or analysis given. Interviews were conducted with ten respondents, including six local journalists and two political and terrorism experts all working in four areas particularly affected by terrorism: Fallujah, Tikrit, Mosul and Baghdad. This paper also draws upon the author's own experience of working for international media outlets in Iraq and for an American non-governmental organisation in Iraq which provided media training to local journalists after 2003.

## Satellite television in Iraq

Al-Jazeera's reach is expansive. The channel claims that it reaches to more than 220 million households in more than one hundred countries and its YouTube channel receives 2.5 million views per month.<sup>4</sup> A survey by BBC Media Action in May 2018 in Iraq showed the media consumption habits – 44 percent of the population in four provinces (Anbar, Ninewa, Baghdad and Salahuddin) used social media to obtain their breaking news, while 56 percent watch breaking news on television.<sup>5</sup>

The actions of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) after the United States-led invasion helped create an environment which the Gulf-based satellite channels could dominate. The CPA abolished the Iraqi Ministry of Information<sup>6</sup> in

1 BBC media action, The media of Iraq ten years on: the problems, the progress, the prospect. Policy Briefing, March 2013. Available at: [http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc\\_media\\_action\\_media\\_iraq\\_ten\\_years\\_on.pdf](http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_media_iraq_ten_years_on.pdf), accessed 20 December 2019

2 Ipsos.com, Online audience measurement in The Arab World, 2 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/online-audience-measurement-arab-world>, accessed: 10 January 2020.

3 Al-Jazeera was founded in 1996 with funding from the Qatari government. Al-Arabiya is owned by MBC (the Middle East Broadcasting Center), the region's largest private satellite broadcaster, which was founded in 1991 by the Saudi businessman Walid al Ibrahim, brother-in-law of the late King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. King Fahd's son is reportedly a major shareholder. Al Ibrahim was among those placed under effective arrest in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel in 2017. Following his release, the Saudi government took a 60 percent stake in MBC, leaving Al Ibrahim with the remaining 40 percent.

4 Al-Jazeera, "Facts and figures," 23 February, 2012. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2012/2/23/facts-and-figures>, accessed: 28 December 2019

5 BBC Media Action, Middle East and North Africa: Iraq. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/where-we-work/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq>, accessed: 20 December 2019

6 Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 2: Dissolution of Entities, 23 May 2003. Available at: <https://web.archive>.

2003 and dismissed thousands of employees, considering them unreliable. The CPA sought to build a new media landscape through post-conflict programmes to train Iraqi journalists delivered by USAID-funded organisations. These programmes provided technical guidance, logistical support, media monitoring and advice.<sup>7</sup> A new television channel, Al-Hurra (literally “the free woman” in Arabic) was launched by the US in February 2004, covering the whole of the Middle East/North Africa with a slogan which translates as “the truth first.” Al-Hurra Iraq was launched in April 2004. Its global viewing figures make it the third most-watched Arabic-language satellite channel, but in global audiences it lags a long way behind Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. In Iraq, after so many years of exposure to a monolithic, state-controlled media, Iraqis appeared reluctant to accept the Western approach to news that was now being presented to them.

The new, young generation of Iraqi journalists sought to learn new techniques from the Gulf channels, especially when covering breaking news, editing news packages, and creating investigative documentaries.

Furthermore, the channels allowed journalists and producers to look at stories from different angles, and to be more visually creative. An Iraqi media studies academic commented:

I was working as a journalist before 2003, the decision of the CPA to release all of the seasoned journalists put the Iraqi audience in the hands of the Arab and International media. Iraqis needed at that crucial time to get the news and I would say Al-Jazeera was number one and Al-Arabiya was number two. They both shaped the Iraqi audience. ... The Americans saw the big influence Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya had and they launched Al-Hura Iraq television

station, but it was not a competitor because it had a more western approach to a closed society. The new generation of Iraqi journalists was left to choose which Arab or international media outlet to follow and as the popularity of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were peaking, this led editors to choose these channels as guideline for journalism.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its popularity among the Iraqi public, Al-Jazeera has been criticised by Iraq’s post-2003 leaders. Prime Ministers Ayad Allawi, Noori Al-Maliki and Haidar Al-Abadi are all known to have condemned what they see as the channel’s biased reporting, favouring Qatari foreign policy interests. A leaked US diplomatic cable in 2010 revealed that, contrary to Al Jazeera’s insistence of being editorially independent, the US viewed it as being used by Qatar to influence foreign policy negotiations.<sup>9</sup> Allawi’s government revoked Al-Jazeera’s license to operate in August 2004, and Iraqi forces raided the channel’s Baghdad office the following month.

These moves were condemned by civil liberty and press freedom groups, and one interviewee suggested that this was part of an ineffective and potentially counter-productive media strategy:

Professional and seasoned Iraqi journalists were speaking against the way Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya reported through conferences and newspapers. Our voices were unheard and the Iraqi government hired the sectarian militiamen to run the Iraqi Communication and media center and these people were not qualified to understand the media coverage and did not deal with the problem correctly. They built more troubles and hostility by shutting down Al-Jazeera.<sup>10</sup>

[org/web/20040701202042/http://iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20030823\\_CPAORD\\_2\\_Dissolution\\_of\\_Entities\\_with\\_Annex\\_A.pdf](http://iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20030823_CPAORD_2_Dissolution_of_Entities_with_Annex_A.pdf), accessed: 16 January 2020

7 Ahmed Al-Rawi, International media organisations’ role in assisting the media sector in Iraq after 2003, *Global Media Journal*, December 2015. Available at: <https://www.globalmediajournal.com/open-access/international-media-organizations-role-in-assisting-the-media-sector-in-iraq-after-2003.php?aid=64447>, accessed: 10 January 2020

8 Interview with respondent 9, 24 March 2020.

9 Robert Booth, “WikiLeaks cables claim al-Jazeera changed coverage to suit Qatari foreign policy.” *The Guardian*, 6 December 2010. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/wikileaks-cables-al-jazeera-qatari-foreign-policy>.

10 Interview with respondent 9, 24 March 2020.

Al-Jazeera defend their reporting and editorial policy on different occasions and while covering various countries. On the 3 January 2007, Al-Jazeera defended their reporting in a statement published on their website<sup>11</sup>, calling media bias a “threat” to Iraq quoting Iraqi journalists and politicians who were praising Al-Jazeera neutral reports. In an open letter published on 26 June 2017, Al-Jazeera further pushed back against claims of media bias and said:

Throughout our long history, we have remained resolute in our commitment to storytelling, to balanced journalism, and to finding and covering stories. We have given a voice to the voiceless. We have shone a spotlight on the people and stories that would otherwise have remained in the dark. And we’ve always done so with responsibility and integrity.<sup>12</sup>

## Reporting on terrorism and insurgency in Iraq

Reporting on terrorism in Iraq has been a particular source of contention. Since 2003, the Iraqi government, other Arab governments and the US have all criticized Al-Jazeera for the language it uses to report terrorist attacks in Iraq, and for its coverage of the US invasion more generally.<sup>13</sup> During the post-2003 period, both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were viewed by the Iraqi government as taking sides against the Coalition and effectively supporting the Sunni insurgency. According to one respondent,

Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya angered the government for many years. The terms these channels used gave the impression that they were sympathetic with the insurgency and were fuelling hatred towards the coalition forces. It was a tough time for Iraqis. I spoke with Al-Jazeera officials in Doha and they said they were following the international guidelines in reporting but what we saw on the ground was not that.<sup>14</sup>

As a result of such concerns, one of Al-Jazeera’s principal reporters, the Syrian-born Spanish citizen Tayseer Allouni, was expelled from Iraq in April 2003 while another journalist was barred from reporting in Iraq in 2003.<sup>15</sup> Allouni, who had interviewed Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan after the 11 September attacks in 2001, was later arrested by the Spanish authorities and charged with involvement in the Madrid bombings in 2004. He was convicted and released in 2012 after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that his conviction was not legal.<sup>16</sup>

By common agreement, terrorism is the use of violence or of the threat of violence in the pursuit of political, religious, ideological or social objectives.<sup>17</sup> However, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya used the terminology of resistance to describe the insurgency in Iraq. Islamists, jihadists and Sunni fighters were rarely labelled as terrorists. For example, in an Al-Jazeera news bulletin from Fallujah in 2010, reporter Muthar Jumaa explained the stages of resistance in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein:

11 Al-Jazeera News, “An Open letter from Al-Jazeera” 26 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/6/26/an-open-letter-from-al-jazeera>, accessed: 1 February 2020.

12 Al-Jazeera News, “An Open letter from Al-Jazeera” 26 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/6/26/an-open-letter-from-al-jazeera>, accessed: 1 February 2020.

13 Guy Adams, “US believes Al Jazeera is ‘propaganda tool of Qatar’” 6 December 2010. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/us-believes-al-jazeera-is-propaganda-tool-of-qatar-2152329.html>, accessed: 5 January 2020.

14 Interview with respondent 8, 4 January 2020. For a similar sentiment, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad’s Green Zone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 145.

15 World News, “Baghdad expels al-Jazeera man,” *The Guardian*, 3 April 2003. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/03/media.iraq> accessed: 11 January 2020.

16 BBC News, “Spain jails al-Jazeera reporter.” 26 September 2005. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4283328.stm>, accessed: 16 October 2020.

17 Alex P. Schmid, “Terrorism - The Definitional Problem,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2004). Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol36/iss2/8>, accessed: 6 January 2020.



At the beginning of the resistance in Iraq, there was fruitful collaboration between the resistance groups as they joined efforts to attack the occupation and whoever collaborated with it since 2004 in Fallujah. The collaboration between the resistance groups was a symbol of Iraq and everyone joined to fight the occupiers like the Salafists, Baathists, Muslim brotherhood, Sufis and independent fighters, who were all united under one flag. Sheikh Abdullah Al-Janabi united the resistance. The Americans had to reconcile in the famous meeting with the resistance groups that brought the Americans and the resistance together in Fallujah. The resistance was stronger before and the Americans confessed that the resistance had successfully controlled two thirds of Iraq but bit by bit things changed and conflicts started between the resistance groups and 2006 was a bad year for the resistance. Instead of fighting the Americans, the Awakening movement was the harshest thing to damage the Iraqi resistance. Despite the awakening campaign, some groups continued to fight on. Both the Awakening<sup>18</sup> and some of the fighters fleeing the country had a negative effect on the resistance. The voice of fighters was loud and everyone feared them and it was a victory to the resistance against the occupation forces. Everything was good when the resistance was united.<sup>19</sup>

One respondent who specialised in analysing the insurgency in Iraq appeared to confirm US and Iraqi government concerns that the Gulf-based satellite channels were taking the

insurgents' side: "I spoke with Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya reporters in Iraq and they said our main role here is to defend the Sunni world and we will welcome any resistance to the newly formed Iraqi government. For us, they are not terrorists."<sup>20</sup>

A similar editorial line can be seen in later reporting. For example, in a 47-minute Al-Jazeera report on the decline of the insurgency in 2010, the reporter Fi Al-Umuq<sup>21</sup> praised the "heroism" of insurgents causing problems for Americans. It includes an interview with Muthanna Harith Al-Dari, who was designated in March 2010 by the UN Security Council's al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee as an al-Qaeda in Iraq fundraiser and operational leader.<sup>22</sup> The report did not challenge Al-Dari on issues relating to terrorism and violence against civilians or the Iraqi army.

Coverage of murders of Western hostages during the insurgency proved to be particularly controversial. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya's broadcasts of videos showing hostages about to be killed was criticised by many Arab and International media organisations. For example, both channels broadcast the video of the murder of US hostage Nick Berg in April 2004, albeit with the beheading itself edited out.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, Arabic news networks in countries such as Lebanon and Kuwait covered the murder without showing the video, while Egyptian newspapers, for example, covered the murder without any photographs.<sup>24</sup> One respondent commented: "It was giving messages to people that these groups are the strongest. It spread fear and this made people more submissive to these groups and some wanted to gain the same power

18 In 2004, Abdullah Al-Janabi was emir of the Mujahideen Shura Council in Fallujah, which united various jihadist factions including al-Qaeda during and after the Sunni insurgency. After the rise of the Islamic State group in northern Iraq, Al-Janabi became the group's leader in Fallujah. The Awakening, or Sahwa movement, was a US-sponsored tribal alliance centred in Iraq's Al-Anbar province (which includes Ramadi and Fallujah) that cooperated with US forces to pacify the insurgency in 2006-7.

19 Muthar Jumaa, Iraq resist Faluja, Al-Jazeera Youtube channel, 11 March 2010. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3drMb2bFlc4>, accessed: 9 of March 2020.

20 Interview with respondent 9, 24 March 2020.

21 Al-Jazeera YouTube channel, Fi Al-Umuq, 9 March 2010. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tP-iB8ummgw>, accessed: 17 December 2019.

22 United Nations Security Council Consolidated List, United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/un-sc-consolidated-list>, accessed: 20 January 2020.

23 Zeina Karam, "Base and vile," The Guardian, 12 May 2004. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/may/12/usa.iraq1>, accessed: 29 December 2019.

24 Ibid.

as these groups.”<sup>25</sup> Western military leaders also complained that the channels broadcast footage of dead military personnel in breach of the Geneva Conventions.<sup>26</sup>

Both channels were also accused of giving more space to pro-insurgent opinion even when appearing to be offering balance. For example, Al-Jazeera’s weekly discussion programme, ‘The Opposite Direction’ hosted by Faisal Al-Qassem, frequently angered Arab and international governments because of its editorial stance and the platform it provided for the host to present his controversial opinions, including on insurgent and terrorist groups.<sup>27</sup> The programme angered the Iraqi government particularly: “the host brings two guests with opposite opinions but always goes for the weaker guest to argue against the resistance in Iraq which empowers the resistance argument. This style was adopted later on the Iraqi local media to support their ideology.”<sup>28</sup> In response, Al-Jazeera argued that opinions in wars of occupation and resistance depend on perspectives, citing the difference of view over the legitimacy of armed violence in Northern Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

As a result of its reporting on the insurgency, the Bush administration developed profound concerns at an early stage about Al-Jazeera’s coverage in Iraq, especially after Al-Jazeera cameraman Salah Hassan was arrested by US forces in November 2003 filming the aftermath of an attack on an American convoy near the city of Baquba.<sup>30</sup> On the basis of photographic evidence of him filming other attacks on US forces, the CPA accused him of having prior

knowledge of these attacks. The then US Secretary of State made a formal complaint to the government of Qatar about Al-Jazeera’s coverage, commenting that such coverage “clouded” bilateral relations.<sup>31</sup> Iraqi victims of violence were also negatively affected by the media’s portrayals of the insurgency. One respondent said:

My father was killed by the Shia militia and it was hurtful to watch the sensationalized stories all the time. There was [sic] sectarian lines in the media and I believe there are many Sunnis in my community who were ashamed for not participating in the insurgency [based on] revenge.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, according to one interviewee a younger generation of Iraqi journalists were impressed by the speed and the technology of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, and began to imitate their style and language in their own coverage:

The majority of the Iraqi journalists who operated after the war are from a new generation who did not study journalism and they looked up to the success these Arab channels had in covering breaking news and they went on copying the news packages of these channels and use the same terminologies without understanding sometimes the indirect message these channels have. Repeating the wrong message on local and Arab media made things more legitimate to Iraqis who were vulnerable to news and to the new change in their lives.<sup>33</sup>

25 Interview of respondent 1, 15 November 2019.

26 See, for example, Air Chief Marshall Brian Burridge’s briefing on 27 March 2003, available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?175779-1/central-command-briefing>.

27 Report, “Al-Jazeera criticized for once again acting as “official spokesman for fundamentalist Groups... as it did in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine.”” Memri.org, 14 June 2007. Available at: <https://www.memri.org/reports/al-jazeera-criticized-once-again-acting-official-spokesman-fundamentalist-groups-it-did>, accessed: 10 January 2020.

28 Interview with respondent 5, 3 December 2019.

29 Al-Jazeera video, “Martin McGuinness: Can political violence be justified?” Al-Jazeera, 21 May 2017. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/head-to-head/2017/3/21/martin-mcguinness-can-political-violence-be-justified/>, accessed 04 January 2020.

30 Jamie Doward, Antony Barnett, Peter Beaumont, David Rose and Mark Townsend, “The leak that revealed Bush’s deep obsession with al-Jazeera,” The Guardian, 27 November 2005. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/nov/27/broadcasting.politicsandiraq>, accessed: 15 January 2020.

31 Lisa O’Carroll, “US makes Al Jazeera complaint,” The Guardian, 28 April 2004. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/apr/28/iraq.iraqandthedia>, accessed: 18 December 2019.

32 Interview with respondent 1, 15 November 2019.

33 Interview with respondent 9, 24 March 2020.

Despite the mixed feelings of Iraqis towards Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, many Iraqis considered these channels on the top of their game when it comes to access to reporting breaking news and documentaries not only for Iraq stories but for the rest of the Arab world.

## Case study: the battles for Fallujah

The US and its allies fought two major battles in Fallujah in 2004 in response to increasing insurgent and terrorist activity in the city, most notably the killing and mutilation of four American private military contractors in March 2004. The first battle took place in April-May, and led to 800 Iraqi deaths (around 200 of whom were insurgents) and fewer than thirty US deaths. This was the largest engagement following the fall of Saddam Hussein's government, and the first major battle involving al-Qaeda-aligned insurgents. The second battle, which took place between 7 November and 23 December 2004, was the bloodiest of the entire conflict, with an estimated 1,200-1,500 insurgents killed and a similar number captured, while 800 Iraqi citizens were estimated to have been killed. US, British and Iraqi forces suffered up to 110 casualties.<sup>34</sup>

While covering the 2004 battles for Fallujah and for many years following, both Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya reporters referred to the insurgency as the resistance, and depicted the battles as a stand against invading foreign occupiers. For example, Al-Arabiya reporter Wael Esam, who was embedded with the insurgents, presented them as a resistance group fighting to liberate their city in his controversial documentary "The Republic of Fallujah."<sup>35</sup> Esam appears to have been one of several Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya reporters who were given privileged access to

the insurgents and were able safely to travel to and from the city. Most local journalists, by contrast, found it almost impossible to operate in the city, and received constant death threats from the insurgents. One respondent said: "I have no idea how Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were operating during the war. We all got threats and had to hide from al-Qaeda but Al-Jazeera cameramen were covering operations without being in trouble with Al-Qa'ida."<sup>36</sup> Throughout the conflict, 110 journalists and forty-seven media workers were killed by insurgents.<sup>37</sup>

Respondents interviewed for this research suggested that the satellite channels and insurgents appeared to have a symbiotic relationship. A respondent who was working in Fallujah during the conflict said, "The insurgents used to come to our hospital and monitor what people were saying. They told us we are only allowed to watch Al-Jazeera. Al-Jazeera never called any insurgency by its real name but their tone was about the resistance."<sup>38</sup> Another interviewee, a senior academic, emphasised the value of the television coverage to the insurgent groups:

I spoke a lot about the importance of reducing the attention in the news coverage on the suicide operations in Iraq because it was giving Al-Qa'ida the image of being powerful. The media empowered Al-Qa'ida at the beginning and this led to two things. [First], the Iraqi army feared fighting Al-Qa'ida, and [second] those who were disfranchised felt that joining these groups will allow them to be heard.<sup>39</sup>

Whatever its motivation, the editorial stance of the satellite channels appears to have made the channels more popular among certain sections of the Iraqi population. One respondent, a journalist, said:

34 The Economist, "The campaign against Islamic State: Fallujah, again" The Economist, 28 May 2016. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/05/28/fallujah-again>, accessed: 5 January 2020.

35 Al-Arabiya YouTube channel, Jumhoriyat Al-Fallujah, 15 September 2012. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrUJicp-7\\_s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrUJicp-7_s), accessed: 29 December 2019.

36 Interview with respondent 1, 15 November 2019.

37 Frank Smyth, "Iraq war and news media: A look inside the death toll," Committee to Protect Journalists, 18 March 2013. Available at: <https://cpj.org/2013/03/iraq-war-and-news-media-a-look-inside-the-death-to/>, accessed: 7 May 2020.

38 Interview with respondent 7, 21 December 2019.

39 Interview with respondent 9, 24 March 2020.

The popularity of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya was at its peak by the end of 2003. They were endlessly repeating footage of attacks in Fallujah and people there loved it because they felt the world's attention was on the resistance there and it gave the insurgency at that time legitimacy and popularity.<sup>40</sup>

Even where the channels' editorial stance was not supported, their speed of response drew Iraqi viewers, especially in the wake of a major event, with significant long-term consequences:

These channels shaped the Iraqi mentality in such a sensitive time. When someone hears the sound of a bombing in his city, he knows Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya are the first to show it and broadcast from the scene. All Iraqis who were interested in watching breaking news were watching these channels.<sup>41</sup>

One respondent stressed the importance of Al-Jazeera's coverage of the Fallujah battles in the subsequent decision to suspend the channel's licence to operate in Iraq:

The relationship Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya had with the Iraqi government was quite bad and it started from the time of the first Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. Mr. Allawi was secular but he was pro-invasion and these channels were against it. Then Noori Al-Maliki was the Prime Minister and he was sectarian and that was when the tension was more obvious. Al-Maliki shut down Al-Jazeera offices and he suspended their licence because of their coverage on Fallujah.<sup>42</sup>

The US government and CPA were similarly dismayed by the channel's coverage. A respondent said: "The Americans demanded that Al-Jazeera shut down in Anbar during

the battle. They knew that they engendered sympathy for the insurgents and it fed the hatred of the coalition forces in Iraq."<sup>43</sup>

## Covering the rise of the Islamic State group

As with its coverage of the battles of Fallujah, Al-Jazeera was perceived to portray the Islamic State's (ISIS's) seizure of Mosul in 2014 as a liberation bringing stability to the city. Al-Jazeera Arabic reporter Ayub Ridha was standing at the borders of Mosul on 12 June 2014 saying the stability is gradually coming back in Mosul.<sup>44</sup>

In another report for Al-Jazeera Arabic by Naser Shadid aired on 23 June 2014, it showed the burned vehicles of the Iraqi army and then went to the city of Haweeja near Kirkuk and said: "we met armed men who covered their faces and they were distributing sweets to the passengers at checkpoints. The passengers were delighted to see the armed men. Most of those armed men are from the Islamic State." The reporter interviewed one member of ISIS and with an ISIS flag behind him is saying: "We praise God that the situation is going well from security to economy and the situation is far better than before." The reporter continues and says: "It has been couple of days since Haweeja fell in the hands of the armed groups" and interviewed a couple of residents who kept saying it is quiet now and everything is back to normal. The armed men are controlling the city from their four gates and they are taking the responsibility to secure the city and protect their people.<sup>45</sup> The way these networks covered ISIS stayed for a while like this but shifted weeks after ISIS took over Mosul in 2014 as one respondent said:

Al-Jazeera's coverage supported the invasion of ISIS at the beginning, and it

40 Interview with respondent 1, 15 November 2019.

41 Interview with respondent 2, 18 November 2019.

42 Interview with respondent 2, 18 November 2019.

43 Interview with respondent 3, 18 November 2019.

44 Al-Jazeera YouTube channel, Arabic link, 12 of June 2014. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldH1O52ueT8>, accessed: 23 December 2019.

45 Al-Jazeera YouTube channel, 23 June 2014, Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_mBQ7J5rl4E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mBQ7J5rl4E), accessed 29 December 2019.

portrayed the fighters as liberators. But soon after the fall of Mosul when ISIS gave a statement saying they were not only interested in establishing their state in Iraq and Syria but that they wanted to move to Saudi Arabia, things changed and Al-Jazeera started to show the bad side of ISIS. Before the fall of Mosul, the coverage was clear that these channels are on the side of the newly rising insurgency. It prepared people mentally to accept the new terrorist group and no one wanted to fight them till things changed completely on the ground and by then, it was too late.<sup>46</sup>

Another respondent added: “I don’t think Al-Jazeera helped the direct recruitment for any insurgency but it gave them legitimacy and the emotional support they needed on the ground.”<sup>47</sup>

Al-Jazeera’s editorial line appeared to shift significantly after the Saudi-led coalition broke ties with Doha and imposed a blockade on Qatar – a move which was partly motivated by Saudi Arabia’s frustration at Al-Jazeera’s line on policy issues including terrorism. The blockade moved Qatar closer to Iran, and Al-Jazeera became more sympathetic to the Iranian government and to Iranian interests in Iraq.<sup>48</sup> One respondent commented that “Al-Jazeera lost most of its credibility [among Iraqi Sunnis] after the collaboration with Iran in covering the protests against Iran.” However, the respondent added that, in the event of a new Sunni insurgency, the channel could nevertheless stoke insurgent feeling if “Al-Jazeera replicated their coverage of 2004 in Fallujah.”<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya filled a vacuum in post-2003 Iraq as the Saddam-era media landscape was swept away. They continued to dominate Iraqi media as local media failed to

fulfil the Iraqi population’s needs to understand the changes transforming the country. However, both channels simplified the civil conflict by blaming the American invasion for the conflict and failing to offer more complex investigation or analysis of the root causes of the insurgency. Instead, they portrayed insurgents simplistically as freedom fighters battling a foreign enemy, and suicide operations against coalition forces as a form of legitimate resistance. This had a significant impact on Iraqi society and politics, which suggests a need for conflict-sensitive journalistic ethics and regulations when countries are undergoing such major transformations. Responsible international media should reject hate speech, sectarian language and the glorification of terrorism. For countries in and transitioning from civil conflict, international observation may be required if international media fail to report in a conflict-sensitive manner. However, the withdrawal of licenses of TV operations by successive Iraqi governments damaged diplomatic relations between Iraq, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and worsened Iraq’s diplomatic position while further polarising the situation within the country.

As Iraq remains unstable and the tension persists between Sunni and Shia communities. International media reporting should be more conscious of its potential to improve or worsen the situation.

46 Interview with respondent 2, 18 November 2019.

47 Interview with respondent 5, 3 December 2019.

48 Evan W. Burt, “Qatar and Iran: Off Bedfellows,” Wilson Center, 7 of August 2017. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/qatar-and-iran-odd-bedfellows>, accessed: 29 December 2019.

49 Interview with respondent 2, 18 November 2019.

## Recommendations

- Television stations need to report the terrorist attacks in clear language that shows these incidents are carried out by terrorist groups rather than armed groups like the Islamic states or al-Qaeda.
- There should be training for local journalists and editors on how to present balanced news reports on terror attacks.
- There should be clear guidelines within these television stations where they cannot use words that shows sympathy with the terrorist groups.
- There should be guidelines on the images used on covering terrorists, and media organisations should not use images which may be perceived as supporting the terrorist groups.

## Appendix: Table of Interviews

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Nature of interview</b>
Respondent 1	Iraqi Journalist who covered Anbar, Tikrit and Mosul	15 November 2019	Phone
Respondent 2	Iraqi journalist based in Mosul	18 November 2019	Phone
Respondent 3	Iraqi cameraman based in Anbar	18 November 2019	Phone
Respondent 4	Iraqi journalist based in Baghdad	20 November 2019	Phone
Respondent 5	Iraqi terrorism expert who interviewed many defectors from different terror groups	3 December 2019	Phone
Respondent 6	Iraqi journalist based in Baghdad	3 December 2019	Phone
Respondent 7	Journalist from Fallujah who lived through the Fallujah war	21 December 2019	Phone
Respondent 8	Media advisor for the Iraqi government	4 January 2020	Phone
Respondent 9	Academic in media studies at an Iraqi University	24 March 2020	Phone
Respondent 10	Iraqi freelance journalist.	24 March 2020.	Phone

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## About the Author

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Mais Al-Bayaa is an Emmy and Robert F. Kennedy award-winning British Iraqi producer and director, focusing on the Middle East. She has a master's degree in Human Rights and International Law from Kingston University in the United Kingdom. Mais has covered the humanitarian crisis and the political changes in the Arab world since 2003 with focus on Iraq and Syria. She has a reputation for investigations and work in hostile environments for international print and broadcast outlets like The Guardian, Channel 4, BBC, PBS Frontline and others. She produced investigative documentaries like 'ISIS and the battle for Iraq' for Channel 4, 'Undercover with the clerics: Iraq's secret sex trade' for BBC and PBS Frontline, and directed the film 'Bahrain: Breaking the silence' for BBC Arabic.

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