FRAGMENTED, POLARISED AND YET UNIFIED: HOW LOCAL MEDIA REFLECT AND TRANSFORM ETHNO-SECTARIAN POLITICS IN IRAQ

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iraqi media is widely undermined by the political actors and conflict parties that use it to advance their strategic goals. Consequently, the Iraqi media landscape appears fragmented along the fault lines of political conflict. A commonly held assumption among academics and Iraqi analysts is thus that local media fuels ethno-sectarian conflict. Recent political change has however moved away from this paradigm, indicating instead that ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq are nearing their endpoint.

This study explores the direction that Iraqi media takes at this crossroads. It examines whether Iraqi TV channels continue to reproduce and thus deepen sectarian cleavages in Iraqi society, namely the Sunni-Shia divide, or if local coverage has begun to reflect the end of this era. In that same spirit, by comparing coverage from different regions, the study also examines whether local channels reflect and thus further the regional fragmentation of Iraq, namely the North-South divide, or if common ground prevails.

To answer these questions, MiCT conducted a comparative content analysis on coverage of two issues of national concern on eight different Iraqi TV channels in August 2019:[1]

(1) the shelling of a PMF-held position near the Balad Air Base in Salahuddin and

(2) the lifting of parliamentary immunity of select Members of Parliament (MPs), namely Talal al-Zobaie, the former head of the Integrity Committee.

The purpose of this research is to understand the differences between how local TV channels select and frame political events and

4

the news time they dedicate to these events. The channels included in the sample were selected from the North, Center and South of the country, representing different political, regional and sectarian strands across Iraq.

The study recorded, transcribed and compared the content of main news bulletins from eight Iraqi TV channels over four days during the third week of August 2019 (19-23 August 2019).

The shelling revealed polarisation between *al-Ahed*, owned by *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH) (the Iran-controlled wing of the Popular Mobilization Forces)[2] and the public channel *al-Iraqiya*, known to be controlled by the government. The analysis found that the two antagonists used 'their' channels to promote opposing narratives on this event. The polarisation is however not between the Sunni and Shia camp, but rather highlights the inner-Shia conflict between certain factions within the PMF and the government.

Countering this polarisation, the content analysis of the shelling also revealed a major midfield of discourse in which no significant differences between Sunni- and Shia-backed channels were found. Iraqi channels engage in broad and pluralistic debate, producing and circulating an array of frames across regional and sectarian borders. These channels' scope of coverage, wealth of opinions and critical analyses position them as evidence of media pluralism at work. From this angle, as salient as it may be, polarisation appears to be a remnant from the time of ethno-sectarian politics, which still work inside the system but are slowly fading.

The analysis of the immunity case revealed a second polarisation between two channels, one owned by the Sunni politician Khamis al-Khanjar

and the other by the influential al-Karbouli family, namely Jamal al-Karbouli – a Sunni businessman and political rival of al-Khanjar. It is again evident that political actors use TV channels to spread their narratives. Yet again, the analysis found rivalry between two Sunni political heavyweights instead of sectarian camps.

By ignoring the topic, two Shia-backed channels in the South as well as the government controlled *al-Iraqiya* denied the topic's national relevance, discrediting the lifting of immunity as party politics that are only relevant for the Sunni-backed audience in the North. In this case, the study found a North-South divide on the level of topic selection but not framing.

The results of this study highlight how the forces of fragmentation in Iraq compete with the forces working towards unity and cohesion. The study also helps illuminate the extent to which Iraq has overcome identity politics in favour of a more democratic political practice.

2 Popular Mobilization Front (PMF) is commonly used as the English term for *al-Hashed as-Shaabi*, a Shia-backed militia created in 2014 in the South of Iraq to fight ISIS in the Northern province of Nineveh.

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Table
of contents

After the fall of the Ba'ath regime in April 2003, the media system in Iraq underwent unrestrained liberalisation. With the old rules suspended and no new regulations in place, the media system soon became densely populated with private broadcasters and newspapers. The BBC Media Action counted more than 150 non-state newspapers, 80 radio stations and 21 television stations in the first year after the fall of the regime (Deane 2013: 18). By March 2006, the number of media houses had already grown to 114 radio stations, 54 television stations and 268 newspapers and magazines (Brookings Institution 2007: 47). The savage deregulation of media also allowed political parties to undermine the media landscape to the extent that soon after regime change, almost all outlets were in some way owned, financed, supported or operated by politicians or political parties – a pattern that has further asserted itself over the past 15 years. Today, aside from a few independent outlets financed by international organisations including *al-Mirbad* in the South, *Radio Nawa* in the North and the website *Niqash*, all of which aim to provide quality journalism, independent journalism in Iraq remains scarce (see also Al-Kaisy 2019).

Meanwhile, the ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq has facilitated regional division. With *al-Qaida* choosing northern Arab cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul as their base in Iraq and ISIS declaring a caliphate in Nineveh in 2014, the predominantly Sunni North of Iraq has become increasingly insulated from the rest of the country. The fight against terrorism and Sunni resistance, displacement and violence has mainly happened in the North. Consequentially, international politics and aid has also disproportionately focused on the North.

7

The predominantly Shia South of Iraq is controlled by tribal leaders and religious institutions such as the Shia *Hawza* in Najaf and Karbala. While Shia parties and politicians have benefitted the most from regime change, successive Iraqi governments post-2003 continued to overlook the poor living conditions in the South. Power supply, healthcare, sewage and potable water, education and transportation and the environment are all in decay. Increasing numbers of educated young people are unemployed and corruption in the local administration is rampant. For vigilant observers, the protests of October 2019 thus came as no surprise. While the protest movement in the South of Iraq and Baghdad forced the government to resign, the North remained relatively calm.

Consequently, the media structures that emerged from the 2003 deregulation have been shaped by a mutually reinforcing ethno-sectarian and regional divide. Sunni-backed parties and politicians operate or support one media camp with outlet headquarters in the North, mainly addressing a Sunni audience in the Northern provinces. Some well-known examples are Fallujah TV, Nineveh *al-Ghad* and *Dijla*. Politicians have repeatedly used these channels to advance their projects and political goals (Al-Rawi 2012; Wollenberg 2019). On the other end are the Shia-backed parties that operate or support another camp, with outlet headquarters in the South. Protagonists in this camp include long-time players *al-Furat, Ittijah* and *al-Taghyir*. New political players such as al-Hashed *as-Shaabi* (PMF) have also become active in promoting their views in the public sphere via proprietary channels such as AAH-run *al-Ahed*.

Post-Saddam media development in Iraq has also allowed a selection of large national channels to consolidate. On the one hand is the public broadcaster *al-Iraqiya*, flagship of the Iraqi Media Network (IMN), which was founded by the interim US government in the early post-regime change days. Despite its public service mandate, *al-Iraqiya* has been used as a mouthpiece by all successive governments since its foundation in 2004. *Al-Iraqiya* competes with the private TV channel al-Sharqiya for first place in the ranking of broadcasters in Iraq.

Al-Sharqiya, founded in 2004 by Saad al-Bazzaz, former crony and later critic of Saddam Hussein, began with a Sunni-backed agenda and coverage for Sunni audiences. Today, *al-Sharqiya* is equally popular in the North and South with its government-critical coverage and a modern corporate identity that is particularly attractive to a younger audience. Equivalent to the two sectarian media camps, these two channels (*al-Iraqiya* and *al-Sharqiya*) are said to represent and promote opposing agendas, namely a government-critical and a government-supportive agenda.

After the defeat of ISIS in Nineveh, Iraq witnessed a wave of protests mainly in the South and Center, demanding an end to sectarian politics. The protests made clear that the youth were finally done with ethno-sectarian fraternalism and political parties that cater to tribal constituencies instead of the nation. The protests made it clear that change was needed.

The question raised in this study is thus whether media networks across Iraq produce a national discourse that transcends regional and sectarian boundaries in a way that contributes to the cohesion of Iraqi society, or if these networks cater instead to the narrow interests of local, sectarian audiences with little to nothing in common. Does media affiliated with different

camps select the same or different topics? Does media from different parts of the country promote the same or different frames in its coverage? How do networks differ in the selection and coverage of topics? Answering these questions will contribute to a better understanding of the extent of cohesion of Iraqi society. The study at hand is thus premised on the notion that a comparative analysis of media coverage on channels representing different camps across the media landscape can provide insight into the state of national cohesion and fragmentation.

While Iraq has managed to maintain some media pluralism over the past two decades, the invasive role of political parties in the media ecosystem remains a matter of concern. The vast majority of all local media outlets continue to be operated, owned or funded by political parties or politicians. Mancini (2012) speak of media instrumentalisation as a strategy to take control 'of the media by outside actors – parties, politicians, social groups or movements or economic actors seeking political influence – who use them to intervene in the world of politics' (p. 37). From this angle, media appears to be a means to foster an agenda, political goal or alliance. According to Mancini (2012), instrumentalisation is more likely to spread in transitional countries or emerging democracies, where the newly emerging parties still lack roots in society and have to compensate that weakness with extra efforts in the field of political communications (Mancini 2012; see also Voltmer 2013: 97). This accompanies a lack of transparency regarding ownership structures in media – an observation that is evident throughout Iraq.

Media capture, through which political or corporate actors seek to make use of mass media to strengthen their position in a competitive situation, is another label for the same phenomenon (Mungiu-Pippidi 2008, Schiffrin 2017, Petrova 2008). The growing literature on media capture dwells on alliances between governments and large national corporations that – together or individually – undermine media to manipulate public opinion in favour of their goals. Mungiu Pippidi (2008) highlights the lack of editorial autonomy and absence of interest in editorial autonomy in the newsrooms as a key feature that facilitates the spread of media capture.

Bajomi-Lázár (2015) introduces colonisation

as another term to describe the media-politics nexus in Eastern Europe, namely Hungary. He posits that parties and politicians in Hungary successfully strive to control media, particularly public media, but do not use the media to influence public opinion. Mass media in Eastern Europe, he argues, has a weak impact on public opinion – and the politicians know that. Hence, instead of intervening with the production of media content, control over media is used to offer media space to affiliates and party members as a reward for party support. Media access is disseminated in the form of a gift with the purpose of strengthening the party's relationship with its constituencies. As in the concept of instrumentalisation, this practice is used to 'compensate for their [the parties] feeble social roots' (Ibid.: 68).

The problem deriving from capture, colonisation and instrumentalisation alike is that the media risks losing the important functions it plays in a democratic society or during democratic transition, namely the function to enact control over powerful elites, be they political or economic. Media that is owned, operated or supported by elites will not hold the elites accountable, or as Stiglitz (2017) puts it: 'If the media are captured, in one way or another, by the same organizations or people that they are supposed to report on and monitor, then the news will, at the very least, not be complete; in many cases, it will be distorted' (Stiglitz 2017: 10). Society is thus deprived of an important pillar of the democratic equation.

For fragile countries suffering from corruption and thus relying greatly on independent, critical and persistent observers, this loss can be highly consequential. Coronel (2010) sees investigative journalism in emerging democra-

cies as key to preventing the corrupt practices that are inevitable during transitional confusion from consolidating and taking root. A critical press, free from political pressure, should act as a watchdog from the beginning of the transition, acting to normalise public scrutiny of government conduct for all stakeholders alike, including citizens, press and political elites (Ibid.: 128-129). Over the past decade, the lack of a media able to practice journalism beyond political control or influence has been pointed out as an obstacle to democratic transition in Iraq by numerous observers (Isakhan 2009, Relly et al. 2015, Al-Kaisy 2019). Iraqi media channels, as pluralistic as they may seem at first glance, still 'operate as extensions of ethno-sectarian political institutions' (Price et al. 2010: 232; Al-Kaisy 2019).

Deane (2013) highlights another problem that comes with the instrumentalisation of media in fragile states: 'For all the fresh potential they offer citizens to hold government to account, new media landscapes are also increasingly fractured – and are often fragmenting along the same fault lines that divide society. Co-option of the media by narrow factional interests appears to be growing'. Deane (2013) refers to Iraq as a case of fragmented media, with a media landscape that is divided along fault lines of ethno-sectarian conflict (Ibid.: 18ff). In his view, mirror effects between media and politics feed into conflict dynamics. Voltmer (2013) discusses the fragmentation of media in emerging democracies as a common yet ambivalent phenomenon. On one side, fragmentation may foster polarisation and thus increase the likelihood of armed conflict or even the reversal of democratic progress. On the other hand, she argues, partisan media offers political orienta-

11 tion and order during times of confusion.

But how can healthy pluralism be distinguished from dysfunctional polarisation? According to Voltmer (2013), the fragmentation of mass media becomes a problem when channels begin fighting one another on behalf of conflict parties. The 'dark side of partisanship' (Ibid.: 184) is mainly characterised by open antagonism among the media and a lack of respect for the opposing camp. Fragmentation also becomes dysfunctional when the mass media loses its ability to connect different segments of society through deliberative processes. A nation, or the socially shared construct of a nation, depends on some discursive glue that connects the individuals and communities of that society. National debates across borders of region, class, gender, age and ethnicity can work as nodes of unification even if the issues themselves are contested or ambiguous. Exchange and deliberation can connect opposing camps or communities of different belongings even if they disagree.

As outlined in chapter two of this study, the Iraqi media landscape is strongly shaped by fragmentation and instrumentalisation. Media structures follow the lines of political competition and conflict, political parties exploit mass media channels and media engage in ethno-sectarian conflict. The instrumentalisation of media is aggravated by a regional division that further separates a predominantly Sunni audience in the North from a predominantly Shia audience in the South. Over the past two decades, scholars have discussed these problems as an obstruction to democratic transition and peace (Wollenberg 2019, Al-Rawi 2012, Isakhan 2009).

Against the backdrop of tangible progress in overcoming ethno-sectarian politics, we have reason to believe that regional and sectarian fault lines in the media sector are beginning to fade. To test this hypothesis, we examined the following:

(1) how local channels differ in the selection of and time dedicated to certain topics;

(2) how local channels differ in the portrayal of the same events;

(3) if similarities and differences between channels are consistent across topics.

To summarise, we seek to understand whether bias in media coverage follows the pattern of regional and/or ethno-sectarian divides. If not, what other patterns emerge from comparative analysis? Is the Iraqi mass media landscape fragmented or unified in how it tackles topics and frames events? If the landscape proves to be fragmented, along what fault lines?

The research sample mirrors regional and ethno-sectarian diversity in the Iraqi media landscape. We selected two national channels, one representing the government-supportive camp *(al-Iraqiya)* and one the government-critical camp *(al-Sharqiya)*. In addition, six small local channels from the North and South were included in the study that address a predominantly Shia (South) and a predominantly Sunni (North) audience. The channels included are as follows:

Al-Iraqiya TV: An outlet perceived as the official state channel and mouthpiece of the government. It belongs to the Iraqi Media Network, which was established as a public service broadcaster by the US administration in Iraq in 2004. Despite government control, *al-Iraqiya* is one of the most popular channels in Iraq, competing with private channels like *al-Sharqiya.*

Al-Sharqiya TV: A private channel owned by Saad al-Bazzaz, former crony of Saddam Hussein who became a dissident in exile in the 1990s. *Al-Sharqiya* is allegedly co-financed by Saudi Arabia and was banned in Iraq multiple times during the al-Maliki administration because of its genuinely government-critical coverage.

Dijla (Tigris) Channel (North): Owned by the al-Karbouli family, namely Jamal and Mohammed al-Karbouli. Mohammed al-Karbouli is the leader of the Anbar Is Our Identity alliance and Jamal al-Karbouli is a businessman and one of the most influential Sunni politicians working behind the scenes. In the 2018 elections, Jamal al-Karbouli presented himself as a strong rival to traditional senior Sunni figures like Khamis al-Khanjar and Osama al-Nujaifi.

13

Al-Taghyeer (Change) Channel (North): News channel funded by prominent Sunni millionaire Khamis *al-Khanjar,* who is also the founder and chairman of the Office of the Arab-Sunni Representative for Iraq. Khamis *al-Khanjar* is a member of the Sunni-backed *Islah and I'mmar* (Building and Reform) party.

Al-Furat (Euphrates) Channel (South): An Iraqi satellite channel affiliated with the *al-Hikma* movement, a Shiite-backed political alliance. It was founded in 2004 by the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, a conservative Shiite religious stream, and has its largest audience in the South of Iraq. It has more religious programming than other channels.

Al-Ahed Channel (South): Owned by Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Shiite militia *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (The League of the Righteous/AAH) – a branch of the PMF. The channel was founded in 2014 to promote the legitimacy and power of the PMF.

Al-Ittijah Channel (South): An Iraqi satellite channel affiliated with the Hezbollah Brigades. The channel has a large audience, especially for its political and religious programs, and pays particular attention to Southern issues.

Al-Fallujah Channel (North): Owned by influential Sunni businessman Khamis al-Khanjar, who sees himself as the representative of Sunni interests in Iraq. Al-Khanjar has been working behind the scenes politically for years and finally participated in the elections of 2018.

The content analysis focused on two events of national concern that took place in the last week of August 2019[3]:

(1) The shelling of a PMF-held position near the Balad Air Base in Salahuddin;

(2) The proposed plan to lift the immunity of 31 Iraqi MPs accused of corruption. On request of the Judiciary Committee, Speaker of the Council of Representatives (CoR) al-Halbousi lifted the immunity of one MP, Talal al Zobaie, member of the *Islah and I'mmar* (Building and Reform) coalition.

These subjects were identified as the two most relevant events in the five days of monitoring and were as such selected for comparative analysis. The subsequent comparison of coverage was based on an analysis of (1) news time dedicated to these topics (and individual aspects) by all channels and (2) the framing of certain aspects with emphasis on the definition of the problem, who to blame for misconduct or failure and what measures should be applied by whom to solve the situation. The who, what and how of criticism was a focal point of the analysis.

3 This focus was introduced because of a larger training program conducted by MiCT in the Southern provinces of Iraq. The objective of the research was to inform the program. It thus focused on Southern issues.

5

With a total of 322 minutes of news time, **the shelling** was the most covered event during the week of monitoring, with extensive reporting from all channels. While there was broad consensus among the TV stations on how to frame the context and background of the event, the channels differed in the government responses they advocated. Pertaining to the question of response, the content analysis identified a polarisation between the AAH-owned *al-Ahed* and the public, government-controlled al-Iraqiya. The two antagonists used 'their' channels to promote opposing narratives on this matter. Whereas *al-Iraqiya* called for sobriety and reluctance, *al-Ahed* advocated a swift and relentless response. The identified polarisation is however not between the Sunni and Shia camps, but rather highlights the inner-Shia conflict between the Iran-controlled AAH and the government.

The polarisation between *al-Ahed* and *al-Iraqiya* is embedded in a pluralistic, non-polarised and open debate across other channels that produce and circulate a wide array of frames. This study thus finds that polarisation is not the primary feature of public debate.

Media coverage of the **immunity case** reveals another polarisation between two channels, one owned by the Sunni politician Khamis al-Khanjar and another by Jamal al-Karbouli, a Sunni businessman and political rival of al-Khanjar. It is again evident that these TV channels publicly promote party-aligned narratives. But instead of divisions along the fault lines of ethno-sectarian conflict, the analysis finds rivalry between two Sunni political heavyweights.

Government criticism is very strong across the sample. Government failure, including naïve trust in the US government and neglect of crucial air defence infrastructure, is discussed

15 broadly and deeply. There appears to be little reluctance to criticize the government or the parties and allies that have government ties. *Al-Iraqiya* stands out in this regard by avoiding government criticism, thus confirming the channel's reputation as a government mouthpiece.

5.1
The shelling of a PMF-held position in Salahuddin by US air strikes

The shelling of a PMF-held position near the Balad Air Base in Salahuddin on 20 August 2019 was the most prominently covered topic during the time monitored, with 159 news items and a total of 322 minutes of coverage across channels. The PMF-controlled position contained mainly weapons stores and although no one was injured, the attack triggered a series of explosions. According to the coverage, the event was preceded by 16 similar attacks in the past three years.

All channels covered the story through extensive interviews with analysts, security experts and politicians. The leading topic across channels was the role of Israel and the US in the shelling as well as the geostrategic context of political relations between Israel, the US, Iraq and Iran. Most channels dealt with the event as a security threat and violation of state sovereignty and coverage was very opinionated, focusing on the following positions:

- The US government is trying to control and weaken Iraq militarily;
- Israel is teaming up with the US government to pursue this goal;
- The US and Israel are undermining Iraqi sovereignty;
- Iraqi air defence is very weak and needs to be modernised;
- Iraq should purchase a Russian air defence system (but is prevented by the US);
- Measures of retaliation are needed and will come;
- The government lacks a strong and immediate response;
- Everyone needs to wait for the end of investigations;
- The quarrel between the head of the PMF al-Fayyad and his deputy Muhandes about how to talk about the involvement of the US army and who has legitimacy to speak about the matter in public;
- The three presidencies advocating considerateness, reluctance, unity and patience;
- Iraq's foreign minister summoning the charge d'affaires of the US embassy;
- This event is connected to previous attacks;
- Ban on aviation over Iraqi airspace as a government response;
- Possible problems of maintenance as the origin of the fire;
- Facts and figures on the actual event: fire, damage and rescue.

These aspects and positions were addressed differently by the channels. The comparative analysis below lays out the differing approaches.

5.1.1
Comparison between channels: The shelling

As the table below demonstrates, each of the channels spent a significant amount of time discussing the shelling as a matter of national concern, with the exception of *al-Iraqiya. Al-Iraqiya* stands out by dedicating comparably little time to the event and excluding some important aspects from its coverage. All of the other channels covered most of the relevant aspects of the shelling, featuring a wide array of opinions and perspectives.

On the level of framing, the differences between channels were weaker and common ground stronger than expected. Even though official investigations are still ongoing, all channels framed the event as a joint US-Israeli venture. All channels (except *al-Iraqiya*) discussed the shelling in relation to the larger geopolitical context of the US-Iran conflict, the Israel-Iran antagonism, the increasing influence of Iran through its support of the PMF and US-Israeli fear of a strong and well-equipped PMF in Iraq. All channels (except *al-Iraqiya*) discussed the event as a challenge to Iraqi sovereignty and a foreign effort to weaken Iraq's military strength. Some channels, including al-Ahed and Ittijah, framed the shelling as an attempt to weaken the PMF. All channels (except *al-Iraqiya*) spoke critically of Iraqi government response and handling of communications and discussed the weakness of the Iraqi air defence and need for it to be strengthened.

The analysis did not find significant differences between Sunni- and Shia-backed channels. On the contrary, *Fallujah, Dijla, al-Sharqiya, Ittijah* and *al-Furat*, despite different priorities, promoted similar frames in their coverage. Only

Channel	Minutes	News Items
Ittijah	67: 25	28
Al-Ahed	62	38
Al-Sharqiya	53:04	24
Dijla	50	22
Al-Furat	34:04	12
Fallujah TV	30:53	24
Al-Iraqiya	25	11

al-Ahed and *al-Iraqiya* stood out as opposing poles.

Al-Ahed: Retaliation, accusations and escalation

Al-Ahed, the channel operated by the head of AAH, stands out for its excessive and occasionally aggressive coverage, dedicating 62 minutes to the topic and making inciteful statements promoting retaliation against the ‚Zionist conspiracy'. *Al-Ahed* appears very concerned about Israel's involvement and uses strong language, dwelling excessively on retaliation. It frames the shelling as US-Israeli 'aggression' intended to weaken or destroy the PMF in Iraq.

Al-Ahed quotes different actors, including MPs that call on the Iraqi government to respond to the 'Zionist' attacks as well as executive leaders of the PMF that condemn the US aggression and put retaliation on the table. It also quotes the Hezbollah brigades, which accuse the US of targeting the PMF in cooperation with Iraqi partners recruited to spy on these sites and provide the Americans with information, suggesting that the same entities will probably also ‚target the sacred shrines and

17 national symbols in Iraq'. Finally, *al-Ahed* uses every opportunity to emphasize the legitimacy and strength of the PMF as an important pillar of state security. This comes as no surprise given the close political affiliation of the channel with AAH.

Al-Iraqiya: Unity, containment and sobriety

Al-Iraqiya chooses the opposite approach, calling instead on people to avoid rushing to premature conclusions. *Al-Iraqiya* begins coverage one day later and spends very little time on the topic (11 items, 25 minutes). This is far less than the smaller local channels in the North and South and much less than its direct competitor *al-Sharqiya*, which devotes more than double the time to the topic. *Al-Iraqiya* distinctly avoids discussing the involvement of Israel. It also refrains from covering the quarrel between the PMF leaders and does not quote Muhandes, who accuses the US of launching the attack. Instead of picking up this kind of heated discourse, *al-Iraqiya* focuses on the meeting of the three presidencies and its emphasis on unity, patience, diplomacy and restraint.

In general, *al-Iraqiya* emphasises the diplomatic stance put forward by the three presidencies: Iraq should not get involved in proxy wars, settling scores is nothing we engage in, we must keep calm and wait for the results of the investigation, no one other than the commander-in-chief should talk on behalf of the Iraqi government and a unified and considered approach is necessary. 'After their meeting, the presidencies stressed the importance of political cohesion, stability on the principle of observing the sovereignty of Iraq, rejection of axes policy and settling of accounts while keeping the country away from being a place to launch attacks on any country and rejection of the principle of proxy war' summarizes one al-Iraqiya reporter the outcome of a presidential meeting. *Al-Iraqiya* also mentions a ban on aviation space as an important government reply to the attack, which is not surprising given the proximity of *al-Iraqiya* to the government and its undisguised role as the government's mouthpiece.[4]

In the midfield: Pluralism, conspiracy and government criticism

All other channels fall somewhere between these two poles of practice. While they cover all frames and aspects of the event, they differ in the aspects that they emphasise.

Dijla and *Fallujah* are more concerned than others about the involvement of Israel. On 22 August, coverage on both channels is almost entirely dedicated to the role of Israel, which is also discussed on the day of the shelling. The channels use harsh wording to accuse Israel of declaring war on Iraq through this action. *Fallujah's* coverage grows harsher as the days progress, along the lines of *al-Ahed*. *Dijla* maintains its analytical and moderate tone throughout its coverage.

Ittijah focuses on US involvement and the US government's negative intentions in Iraq. The US is portrayed as a disloyal ally fighting Iraq from the inside, trying to weaken Iraq's military strength, particularly the PMF. The channel discusses Washington at length as the main entity trying to prevent Iraq from buying weapons from anyone else. The US, the channel claims, wants Iraq as 'their' weapons market, with full control over the weapons circulating in Iraq. 'In the past, US forces pointed their guns towards

the Iraqi people, and now they are targeting *al-Hashed as-Shaabi,* so there is no need for them to be in Iraq. The attack aims to weaken Iraq and the PMF', says one expert interviewed in a news report on *Ittijah.* The PMF's legitimacy as an important element in Iraq's security apparatus is highlighted multiple times, and Israel is presented as a second rank player in the US-led offensive.

Al-Sharqiya and *al-Furat* both dwell on the weakness and failure of the government to come up with a strong and swift response. *Al-Sharqiya* hosts a 20-minute interview with an

MP from Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition that talks extensively about the government's unlucky foreign policy and its inability to prevent Iraq from becoming a battleground for Iran-Israel proxy war. Other news items also present the government as cowardly. *Al-Sharqiya* and *al-Furat* similarly avoid aggressive and inciteful statements, but *al-Furat* stresses the government's failure in responding adequately to the attack. The government's radio silence is framed as a manifestation of weakness and a national embarrassment. The lack of protection (a deterrent air force) is framed as an alarming condition against which the government must act. 'The dignity of the Iraqi nation is violated in daytime and the government did nothing to protect the airspace and its people', says one analyst interviewed by *al-Furat.*

Fallujah, al-Sharqiya, al-Furat and *al-Iraqiya* all comprehensively cover the diplomatic statements put forward by the three presidencies. Each of the channels promotes unity and considerateness in responding to the event, thus supporting the government in its de-escalation efforts. Only Ittijah pays little attention to these

diplomatic efforts.

Against the background of these frames and patterns, this analysis does not find the emergence of a Sunni-Shia divide or ethno-sectarian narratives. Differences and similarities across coverage transcend both ethno-sectarian and regional fault lines.

19

Keywords	Key promoter		Frame
Retaliation, accusation and escalation	*al-Ahed*	62:00	The attack needs to be met with ruthless retaliation.
Government criticism	*al-Sharqiya; al-Furat*	98:00	The government succumbed to the wrong allies and allowed the air defence to remain weak and controlled by others. A much-needed government response to the attack is still missing.
Concern over Israel's involvement	*Dijla; Fallujah*	80:53	Israel teamed up with the US to declare war on Iraq through this action.
Concern over US involvement	*Ittijah*	67:25	The US is fighting Iraq from inside with the purpose of weakening Iraq's military strength, particularly the PMF.
Unity, containment and restraint	*al-Iraqiya*	25	Iraq should not get involved in proxy wars; settling scores is nothing we engage in; we must keep calm and wait for the results of the investigation; a unified approach is needed.

5.2
Lifting the parliamentary immunity of Iraqi MPs

On 18 August, the Parliament received a request from the Supreme Judicial Council to lift the parliamentary immunity of 21 of its members at the start of the third legislative term due to accusations of corruption and other criminal acts. The Public Prosecutor issued arrest warrants for the MPs and sent their names to the Presidency of the Parliament. Some of the MPs were subsequently stripped of their immunity by Mohammed al-Halbousi, Speaker of the Council of Representatives (CoR), including Talal al-Zobaie, former Chairman of the Integrity Com-

mittee. The channels discussed the following frames in depth over the period of monitoring:

The legitimacy of al-Halbousi's decision is questionable

Coverage focused on the legitimacy of Al-Halbousi's decision to lift the parliamentary immunity of the accused MPs. Article 63 of the Constitution requires a parliamentary vote on this decision during working days of Parliament. However, during recess, the Speaker has the right to strip MPs of their immunity without putting the matter to a vote, which requires specific circumstances. Accordingly, while al-Halbousi's decision is within the boundaries of the law, the

question is brought up whether al-Halbousi had purposely waited for recess in order to circumvent the vote.

Mohammed Al-Halbousi is settling scores

Some channels strongly criticised al-Halbousi's decision, accusing him of abusing his powers to remove MPs against which he holds a grudge. Talal al-Zobaie is at the centre of that contestation, claiming to have been politically targeted for having formerly accused al-Halbousi of fraud. Some channels claimed that the selection of MPs that actually lost immunity was politically motivated.

Corruption accusations against Talal al-Zobaie

Al-Zobaie is among the first MPs to actually be stripped of immunity (in contrast to the MPs that have so far only been requested by the judiciary). He stands accused by the media of major corruption during his chairmanship of the Integ-

rity Committee, including abuse of official position as Chairman of the Combating Corruption Commission through theft and taking shares of leftover money.

A total of 71:28 minutes of news time was dedicated to this topic during the week monitored.

5.2.1
Comparison of coverage on lifting parliamentary immunity

The content analysis of coverage on the second topic reveals two strong antagonistic camps. *Fallujah* and *Tahrir*, both owned by Sunni politician Khamis al-Khanjar, focus on statements and frames that reject the decision to lift the parliamentary immunity of selected MPs. *Dijla* on the other hand openly supports *al-Halbousi's* move against corruption among political elites. *Al-Ahed*, *al-Sharqiya* and *Ittijah* take a balanced stance, but *Ittijah* only dedicates half a minute of news time to the topic. *Al-Iraqiya* and *al-Furat* do not cover the topic.

Pro lifting	No bias	No coverage	Contra lifting
Dijla	*al-Sharqiya* (10) *al-Ahed* (14:39) *Ittijah* (0:35)	*al-Furat, al-Iraqiya*	*Fallujah* (10:50) *Tahrir* (4:26)
31:03 min.	25:09 min.	0 min.	15:16 min.
Talal al-Zobaei is a criminal found guilty by overwhelming evidence. His case must be processed in court.	The decision of al-Halbousi is contested but within the boundaries of the law.		Al-Halbousi is settling scores with his adversary al-Zobaie. The decision to strip immunity is an act of unlawful revenge.

21

Contra lifting

Fallujah and Tahrir both select statements and speakers that frame the decision as an act of revenge by al-Halbousi against al-Zobaei. Fallujah allows al-Zobaie to comprehensively present his view on two subsequent days, 20-21 August. On Tahrir, al-Zobaie is interviewed for a much shorter duration, allowing him only enough time to express his surprise and intention to not comply with the decision. Al-Zobaie accuses al-Halbousi of abusing his power and circumventing the law. He sees the lifting of immunity as retaliation by al-Halbousi for what happened in 2018 when al-Zobaie, in his function as Chairman of the Integrity Committee, submitted documents proving al-Halbousi's involvement in corruption. In a long interview on Fallujah, he vowed to respond legally and stop al-Halbousi's retaliation in Parliament. Al-Zobaie also called on the Iraqi judiciary to investigate the election of al-Halbousi as Speaker, stressing his many violations.

On 19 August, in one of its first pieces on the topic, Fallujah references popular rejection of the decision, claiming that the MPs as well as the people are upset with the apparent bias involved in the selection of MPs. Fallujah and Tahrir mention the 30 other MPs (from other blocs) that have been charged with the same accusations and yet have not lost their immunity. From the perspective of their sources, the selection of MPs is politically motivated, a view shared by the Iraqi Decision Coalition, al-Zobaie's party, as reported by Tahrir. In another report, Tahrir argues that lifting his immunity is unlawful because Article 63 only allows for the arrest of MPs during legislative terms.

Pro lifting

At the other extreme of the spectrum, Dijla openly and strongly supports al-Halbousi's decision to lift the MPs' immunity. Like Fallujah, Dijla is mainly interested in the case of al-Zobaei, paying little attention to the other MPs accused of corruption. Dijla promotes and praises the decision to strip al-Zobaie of his immunity as the right way to hold this criminal accountable. Numerous accusations against al-Zobaie are discussed in detail, e.g. by researcher Moayad al-Juhaishi, who says that 'Talal al-Zobaie paid 4 to 5 million dollars to buy the MP post and paid nearly 15 to 20 million dollars to buy the post of minister but did not get it. Al-Zobaie was extorting managers and bodies and now owns a whole street in west Baghdad'. On Dijla, the legitimacy of the act is discussed with reference to progress in the fight against corruption instead of in reference to the act's compliance with laws and rules.

No bias

Al-Ahed, Ittijah and al-Sharqiya do not take a strong stance in this debate. Al-Sharqiya has comparably little coverage (10 minutes) and focuses on the legal context by interviewing lawyer Tarik Harb, who explains the situation from a legal point of view. He avoids passing judgement or sharing his opinion on the legitimacy of the act, explaining instead the legal consequences for the affected MPs and the CoR. Apart from this long interview, al-Sharqiya dedicates no further broadcasting time to the topic. Al-Ahed is among the few channels that cover the case closely – publishing news, comments and interviews on a daily basis over the four days moni-

tored (14:39 minutes). The analysis found that al-Ahed took a rational and considered approach, presenting facts and figures about the MPs, discussing the legal context and addressing arguments and input from both sides. At least two of al-Ahed's longer pieces discuss the ambiguity of the situation and quote different voices from across the two camps.

The content analysis found no sectarian camps or biases in the framing of this event. It did however identify a gap between channels from the North, which provided extensive coverage on the topic, and channels from the South, which ignored the topic. Three Shia-backed channels as well as the public al-Iraqiya did not dedicate any time to the event. Apparently, the relevance of the topic was assessed differently between channels in the North and the South.

a. Findings indicate progress in overcoming sectarian divisions

The civic movement in Iraq has long been calling for an end to sectarian politics. In the 2018 elections, the formation of cross-sect party alliances ushered in a new era of non-sectarian politics. The findings of this study confirm this trend. Discourse was not found to be fragmented along sectarian fault lines, indicating progress in overcoming sectarian divisions. The question posed in the academic debate (chapter two) of whether local media in Iraq fuel ethno-sectarian cleavages and conflict can thus be answered in the negative. Strong signs of inner-Shia and inner-Sunni conflict in public debate rather suggest that sectarian divides are being replaced by contestation and competition between parties and party-owned media within sects.

b. Unity in framing is countered by polarised calls to action

The content analysis found unity, polarisation and diversity among the same discourse. The analysis of the shelling and identification of problems and culprits (framing) is unified across channels, most of which agree on the basic frames, including the aim of the US to weaken Iraq through such actions, the weakness of Iraqi air defence and the government's failure. Regardless of their political colour, media channels apparently close ranks when the nation is under threat. The same phenomenon was found in previous research on local coverage of the liberation of Mosul from ISIS (Wollenberg et al 2017). According to Baden & Meyer (2018), this type of far-reaching consonance among media on the level of framing boosts the impact that media has on the opinion-making processes among

media users:

'[…] people primarily choose among those frames offered to them in the media, which means that frames omitted in the news remain unavailable to them. Accordingly, at least where high consonance in news framing narrowly restricts the range of offered frames, media should be able to exercise a strong influence upon people's understandings and attitudes' (Ibid., p. 40).

The current study finds that unity in regard to framing the problem is countered by contestation regarding the question of responses. What is an appropriate government reaction in the face of a military provocation? The analysis found a diverse array of approaches, not only between channels but also within individual channels. Al-Ahed and al-Iraqiya were however polarised in this respect. This outcome, we posit, reflects the effort of Iraqi media to strike the right balance between unity and diversity.

c. Common ground prevails (but is challenged) between the North and South

The study did not identify significant differences between how Northern and Southern channels cover the shelling. Audiences in the North are by no means exposed to different frames or schemes of selection than their Shia counterparts in the South. The theoretical framework (chapter three) elaborates on how this type of national debate across regional and sectarian borders works as glue for society. It can thus be considered as contributing to national cohesion and unity.

This does not hold up in coverage of the parliamentary immunity case. By dropping the topic, the two Shia-backed channels in the South and government mouthpiece al-Iraqiya deny the national relevance of the topic, thus labelling the

event as party politics only relevant to the Sunni audience in the North. Over the duration of analysis, Al-Ahed, a channel with strong roots in the South, however spearheaded a countertrend by covering the event comprehensively and without bias.

d. Strong media instrumentalisation is countered by growing media literacy

Media capture remains a critical practice to watch. The findings of this study demonstrate that in line with Hallin's (2011) definition of instrumentalisation, Iraqi politicians use media to promote and impose their narratives among the public. But how far can these efforts reach within the context of an open, pluralistic and critical media landscape where numerous sources and opinions are available to everyone? How likely is the credulous and naïve media user under these circumstances? Recent studies on media use in Iraq indicate a high level of distrust in media and a rather eclectic use of different channels (Fiedler & Wollenberg 2017; Al-Kaisy 2019). People are sceptical about the credibility of local media, comparing sources and discussing media content with friends and family. In the case of Hungary, Bajomi-Lázár (2015) found that politicians adapted their strategies to address the weak impact of mass media on public opinion. In the face of the dwindling credibility of party media in Iraq, we can expect to see similar change soon.

e. Ubiquitous government criticism indicates large margins of press freedom

In the coverage of the shelling, government criticism is ubiquitous. Across channels, it appears common to accuse the government of failure and mismanagement. The highly critical tone and genuinely opinionated coverage

25 indicates large margins of freedom for critical journalism in Iraq. According to this study, the 'public scrutiny of government conduct' that Coronel (2010) and other scholars (see chapter two) deem necessary for transitional countries is not lacking in Iraq. Against the backdrop of relentless government efforts to silence critical voices over the past 10 years, this comes as quite a surprise. During his tenure, Nouri al-Maliki tried to suppress government-critical channels, subjecting them to harassment of all kinds, from penalties to revocation of licenses please delete: (Wollenberg 2021). Yet the journalists in this study don't mince words. This study found that critical journalism has outlasted all efforts to undermine its autonomy. One explanation for this resilience is the weakness of government that comes with fragile statehood. Paradoxically, from this angle, fragile statehood in Iraq seems to work in favour of press freedom and media pluralism.

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