

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

Rebuilding the Iraqi Media: Issues for Congress

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Summary

With the end of Saddam Hussein's rule, Iraq's media environment is no longer tightly restricted, and Iraqis now have access to a number of media sources. For U.S. policymakers, this free flow of information poses a challenge; how can the United States encourage a democratic Iraqi media while limiting anti-coalition messages? Another challenge is measuring the effectiveness of U.S.-sponsored broadcasting in Iraq in promoting U.S. policy objectives, including the development of an independent Iraqi media. In March 2003, the U.S. Defense Department launched the Iraq Media Network (IMN). The FY2004 Iraq Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-106) set aside \$100 million for IMN and \$40 million for the Middle East Television Network (METN), another U.S.-sponsored Arabic network scheduled for launch in January 2004. This report discusses possible congressional options concerning the rebuilding of Iraq's media. It will be updated periodically. For more information, see CRS Report RL31889, *The Al-Jazeera News Network: Opportunity or Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East?* by Jeremy M. Sharp and CRS Report RS21565, *The Middle East Television Network, An Overview*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

The Iraqi Media Under Saddam Hussein

In the first half of the 20th century, Iraq's political culture featured a thriving journalistic and literary environment. "What is written in Cairo is published in Beirut but read in Baghdad," is an old Iraqi saying that testifies to an earlier, somewhat less tightly controlled era.¹ However, with the Iraqi Baath party's rise to power in 1968, Iraq became a completely authoritarian regime where the role of the media was to reinforce state control. Under the Baath, the number of daily newspapers published declined from hundreds to a mere handful.

¹ Daragahi, Borzou. "Rebuilding Iraq's Media," *Columbia Journalism Review*. New York: July/Aug. 2003. Vol.42, Issue 2; p. 45.

Under Saddam, journalists who failed to lionize their leader were routinely tortured and imprisoned, and as many as 500 Iraqi journalists and writers disappeared after 1968. In 1992, Saddam Hussein's oldest son, Uday, was appointed head of the Iraqi Journalists Union. Over the next 11 years, Uday would come to control most newspapers and television stations, promoting the image of his father while carving out his own personal media empire. Uday, like Saddam, imagined himself to be a populist figure and used the press to try to build his image. Uday also controlled Shabbab TV (Youth TV), a station intended to appeal to younger audiences.

During Saddam's era, Iraqi authorities jammed foreign radio broadcasts, and banned satellite dishes as well as most uses of the Internet. Only well-connected officials and members of Saddam's extended family were allowed to own dishes. According to the international press monitoring group Reporters Without Borders, "if the police found one at the bottom of your garden or hidden in a cardboard box on the roof, it would be immediately seized and if you were caught out a second time, you risked up to a year in prison."² Restricted Internet access was introduced in 2000, though it remained a luxury. Email usage was heavily monitored by Iraqi intelligence agents.

The U.S.-enforced no-fly zones in northern Iraq permitted Iraqi Kurds unprecedented political freedom, as U.S. air power kept Saddam Hussein from extending Iraqi control into the northern enclave. As a result, the Iraqi Kurds had a relatively free press and enjoyed Internet access long before other Iraqis.

U.S.-Sponsored Broadcasting to Iraq Before the Iraq War

For FY1998, as part of a congressional push for regime change in Iraq, Congress appropriated \$5 million for Radio Free Iraq (P.L. 105-174) under the direction of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL). The radio service began broadcasting in October 1998 from Prague. Soon after the creation of Radio Free Iraq, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act (ILA) (P.L. 105-338), which authorized, among other things, \$2 million in broadcasting funds for those groups. In 2000, Congress earmarked \$6 million (P.L. 106-429) for opposition broadcasting by the Iraqi National Congress (INC). In August 2001, the INC began Liberty TV, broadcasting satellite television into Iraq from London.

Although not specifically targeted at Iraq, Radio Sawa, a region-wide Arabic language music and news station, was launched by the Voice of America (VOA) in March 2002. The former Iraqi government jammed Sawa's signal, forcing broadcasters to constantly change frequencies and Iraqis to scan the dial for the latest position. Today, research indicates that Radio Sawa has a respectably sized audience inside Iraq.³ The station broadcasts a unique blend of modern Arabic and western music, and its challenge will be to establish trust with Arab listeners interested in news broadcasts and analysis.

² Reporters Without Borders, *Iraq Report 2002*, March 26, 2003.

³ "Radio Sawa is Number One in Iraq, New Survey Shows," Broadcasting Board of Governors, November 18, 2003.

The Iraqi Media Post-Saddam

The dissolution of Saddam Hussein's regime has led to a media free-for-all in many parts of Iraq. Political parties, prominent businessmen, returned Iraqi exiles, Islamic groups, independent journalists, and informal associations of citizens have launched over 200 newspapers, although many of these publications may now be dormant.⁴ Iraqis also have more options than ever for televised news and entertainment. Foreign press reports of life in Iraq have often featured stories of Iraqis purchasing \$200 satellite dishes in droves. Some estimate that over 35% of Iraqis now own dishes, which allow them to receive both Arab and western stations. Internet access continues to be expensive for many Iraqis, though customers at Internet cafes no longer have their Internet usage monitored by Iraqi security agents.

Al-Jazeera, the controversial 24-hour Arab news network based in Qatar, has received mixed reviews from Iraqis, many of whom perceive it as having supported the Baath regime. In September 2003, the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) banned Al-Jazeera and part Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya from covering IGC proceedings, after the stations aired a segment featuring masked Iraqi fighters who advocated attacks against coalition forces. On November 24, 2003, the IGC, with the approval of L. Paul Bremer, banned Al-Arabiya from broadcasting in Iraq after it aired a taped message, purportedly from former president Saddam Hussein, that called for attacks on Iraqis cooperating with the American occupation.

The Iranian government has markedly increased its broadcasting in Arabic to Iraq since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As expected, most Iranian channels provide critical views of U.S. policy and emphasize opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq. Some stations, such as Sahar TV, broadcast popular religious and cultural programs to Iraq, but accompany such programs with anti-coalition news reports, featuring demonstrations, and statements by western officials critical of the U.S. presence in Iraq.⁵

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)and the Iraqi Media

The relationship between CPA officials and the Iraqi media has been constantly evolving since the post-combat phase started in April 2003.⁶ Many Iraqi-run newspapers, in an attempt to project their own independence, do not routinely print CPA-generated news stories. Many Iraqi newspapers have been critical of the U.S. presence in Iraq, and CPA officials have been challenged in differentiating between legitimate criticism and incitement of violence against U.S. forces. This process has been a delicate balancing act for both sides, particularly in the war's chaotic aftermath.

⁴ "Media Available in Iraq," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, October 23, 2003.

⁵ "Sahar TV Offers Negative View," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, July 3, 2003.

⁶ Some experts note that CPA and Iraqi efforts to resurrect the national media are, in many ways, a microcosm of the larger effort to rebuild Iraq. In this context, policymakers are attempting to balance the need for maintaining order and stability with the need to transfer authority and sovereignty to Iraqis.

Sometimes publishers have crossed CPA's threshold of acceptable journalism. During the summer of 2003, the CPA shut down a newspaper and radio station for encouraging violent resistance to the occupation. Some Iraqis and international groups decried the CPA's action, calling it censorship. According to General David Petraeus, U.S. commander in charge of northern Iraq, "what we are looking at is censorship, but you can censor something that is intended to inflame passions."⁷ In June 2003, CPA head Paul Bremer issued Order #14, listing prohibited media activity. Section 2 of Order #14 prohibits media organizations from inciting violence against religious or ethnic groups and women, inciting civil disorder and rioting, inciting violence against the CPA, and advocating alterations to Iraq's borders by violent means.⁸ Press reports also suggest that the CPA has restricted news coverage inside hospitals and morgues.⁹

The CPA has started to form an independent media commission, consisting of civilian Iraqi journalists, to enforce Order #14, and develop new and more specific guidelines for journalists. Critics have denounced such regulations, accusing the CPA of using an Iraqi-led regulatory commission to provide political cover for what they deem as CPA censorship. The CPA sees the new regulatory board as a practical compromise and as empowering Iraqis as part of the democratization process. In July 2003, Iraqis and other media analysts held a conference in Athens, Greece, where they developed proposals for regulating a future independent Iraqi media.

The Iraq Media Network. In February 2003, as part of CPA's efforts to rebuild Iraq's media, the Defense Department awarded a year-long contract to Science Applications International Corporation. (SAIC) to build the Iraq Media Network (IMN).¹⁰ The contract calls for SAIC to establish 3 news bureaus, a satellite TV network, and a national newspaper, in addition to training Iraqi journalists. The contract, at a reported cost of \$3 million to \$6 million per month, expires at the end of 2003.

Wartime and post-war chaos, management turnover, and a reported lack of funds have worked to slow IMN's formation and development. Like many U.S.-run reconstruction operations, IMN has inherited an aging Iraqi infrastructure, with old broadcasting studios filled with makeshift equipment, some of which was looted after U.S. forces entered Baghdad. Many former employees of the Iraqi state media have been fired, but practical considerations have allowed some to remain, joining a mix of former Iraqi exiles, new hires, and American media consultants. Some of Iraq's communication towers were bombed during the war, although some remain intact and in working order.

Public reaction to IMN's televised content reflects what some analysts see as its conflicting missions of serving both as a tool of U.S. public diplomacy and an

⁷ Gourevitch, Alex, "Exporting Censorship to Iraq," *The American Prospect*, Vol. 14, Issue 9, October 1, 2003.

⁸ Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 14, Prohibited Media Activity. June 10, 2003.

⁹ Cotts, Cynthia. "Is Anyone Watching the Iraqi Media Network," *The Village Voice*, November 12, 2003.

¹⁰ According to the Center for Public Integrity, the contract is managed by the office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith. See "Anatomy of a Contract," The Center for Public Integrity, November 6, 2003.

independent Iraqi network. IMN television has devoted considerable time to CPA public service announcements, and without a fully functioning Iraqi government, some U.S. officials believe IMN is one of the few vehicles capable of reaching large numbers of Iraqis.¹¹ According to Bremer aide Dan Senor, the Iraq Media Network is “our only voice in a sea of hundreds of other voices. We don’t, unlike Saddam, shut down all the other voices and allow only ours to penetrate. Ours is one of many.”¹² Although IMN had initially resorted to re-broadcasting old programming from Arab networks, by the fall of 2003, IMN’s television stations were devoting 6 hours to news per day, including 30 minutes to an hour of local news coverage.¹³ CPA head L. Paul Bremer has appeared on IMN most Thursdays and Fridays in taped messages to the Iraqi people, similar to those of the President’s weekly radio address in the United States. Some public diplomacy specialists have criticized IMN for not distinguishing itself from the CPA and producing original programming. Observers note that SAIC has little experience in training journalists and establishing independent media and has previously performed defense functions such as psychological operations. According to CPA spokesman Charles Heatly, “there has always been a debate because our two aims are conflicting. But we are very slowly going to develop into an independent voice to be seen and liked.”¹⁴ As IMN’s technical capabilities grow, there may be continuing disagreement over whether the network is a mouthpiece for the CPA, an independent Iraq-run news network, or both. Ultimately, most observers agree that IMN will have to provide compelling content in order to reach a wide audience of Iraqis, many of whom now have multiple choices for their news and entertainment.

Possible Issues for Congress

Congress currently funds two U.S.-sponsored television networks in the Middle East: the Department of Defense-managed Iraq Media Network (IMN) and the soon to be launched Middle East Television Network (METN) based in Virginia,¹⁵ in addition to funding Radio Sawa and a youth-oriented Arabic language magazine called Hi. Many favor U.S. sponsorship and control of these outlets on the grounds that the United States must have its own media distribution capability to counter biased, anti-American reporting in the Middle East and Muslim world. Others suggest that the United States would be perceived in a more favorable light if U.S. funds were channeled to independent media projects. Congress provides annual appropriations to the State Department for grants to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to train journalists in developing

¹¹ A recent State Department poll found that 59% of Iraqis without satellite television watch IMN. Only 12% of Iraqis with satellite television watch IMN. See U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, “TV is a Crucial Information Source for Iraqis,” October 16, 2003.

¹² “Army’s Iraq Media Plan Criticized,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 2003.

¹³ IMN regularly rebroadcasts segments from the Pan Arab TV channel MBC, in addition to Egyptian soap operas, soccer matches, music videos, and old films and folk songs.

¹⁴ “Speeches Called Propaganda,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2003.

¹⁵ METN is being managed by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent, government-funded entity responsible for all U.S. government and government-sponsored, non-military, international broadcasting. See CRS Report RS21565, *The Middle East Television Network: An Overview*, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

countries. In Iraq, the debate is complicated by concern for the local security situation, which may supersede more long-term concerns for U.S. public diplomacy strategy.

Funding for U.S.-Sponsored Arabic Language Broadcasting. The FY2004 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-106) set aside \$100 million for the continued development of Iraq Media Network, with the objective of enabling Iraqis to assume total private control over the network in two years. This act also appropriated \$40 million for METN, the Arabic-language television station designed to bolster U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East. METN already received \$30 million under the 2003 Emergency Wartime Supplemental Act (P.L. 108-11), and is slated to receive an additional \$30 million under the Commerce, Justice, State, and Judiciary Appropriations Bill (H.R. 2799) now being considered.

Some lawmakers have raised questions regarding the possible duplicate missions of IMN and METN. Both stations will be available to Arabic-speaking audiences via satellite and through a terrestrial-based network and are expected to provide U.S. perspectives on the reconstruction mission in Iraq as well as wider U.S. foreign policy goals in the region. During floor debate on the FY2004 Supplemental, Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Richard Lugar offered an amendment that would have shifted funds for broadcasting in Iraq from the Defense Department to the State Department. The amendment was withdrawn over concerns for a lack of resources at State to manage such a project. According to officials, METN's mission differs from that of IMN, in that METN is more focused on the region and IMN geared more toward Iraqi audiences.

Funding Local Media. Some analysts suggest that Congress can hasten the democratic evolution of indigenous media by directing funds to local initiatives rather than U.S.-run enterprises. This approach is currently being used in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia, where the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and NGOs have been funding local television stations and newspapers outside the control of the central government, and training journalists in reporting techniques. In Afghanistan, Internews, an NGO that receives some of its funding from grants from the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, manages the Open Media Fund for Afghanistan, which provides grants to radio stations and journalists. Internews sees its activities as a more subtle and effective way of fostering objectivity in Afghanistan and elsewhere over the long term.

Managing U.S. Public Diplomacy. Members of Congress have been concerned about a perceived decentralized approach to public diplomacy and broadcasting in the Middle East region, with the Defense Department, the State Department, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, and USAID playing roles. In response, Section 59 of H.R. 1950, the House passed Foreign Relations Authorization Bill, states that, "the Department of State, in coordination with the United States International Broadcasting Agency, shall develop a comprehensive strategy for the use of public diplomacy resources and assume a prominent role in coordinating the efforts of all Federal agencies involved in public diplomacy."¹⁶ As the security situation remains tenuous in Iraq, both military and civilian officials continue to play public diplomacy roles in the reconstruction process.

¹⁶ See Millennium Challenge Account, Peace Corps Expansion, and Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 2003, H.Rept. 108-105, Part IV (#19-006), July 17, 2003.