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The Iraqi media: 25 years of relentless repression

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his son Uday have turned what was once one of the most vibrant presses in the Middle East into an instrument of propaganda.

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Introduction

Iraqis are known to secretly claim that there are as many pictures of Saddam Hussein as there are people in their country (20 million). As if that were not enough, official Iraqi newspapers feature front-page photographs of al-Batal al-Qadissiya (the hero of the Iran-Iraq War) almost every day. President Saddam Hussein is also said to have declared that, should their television ever break down, all Iraqis would need to do is simply place one of his pictures in front of their screen. Not that the Iraqi President considers any technical disruption of TV programmes as a joke. In the 1990s, the Ministry of Information, Hamid Yusuf Hamadi, was instantly dismissed due to an incident of this sort and replaced by Hammam Abd al-Khaliq, a transmissions engineer.

On Tuesday, 21 January 2003, as part of an evening television special on Iraq, the Franco-German television network *Arte* presented a documentary ironically titled “Our Friend, Saddam.” The next day, the official Iraqi press described this programme as a “tribute to our honourable President.” The significance and sincerity of this tribute was never in doubt, because the documentary had lasted two full hours!

This is how the propaganda and disinformation system operates in the Ba’athist state that Saddam Hussein, his family and his clan (the Tikritis) have been governing for the last three decades. Iraq’s President maintains his power through an institutionalised system of repression and censorship that has had catastrophic consequences for press freedom. Ranked as the 130th least tolerant country in the world in terms of press freedom, in an index developed by Reporters without Borders, Iraq is one of the top 10 most hostile countries in its treatment of journalists and the media in 2002.

The regime’s political propaganda

According to the biography *The Politics of Revenge*, written by Said K. Aburish, the Iraqi leader discovered the power of propaganda very early in life. As a political exile in Cairo from 1959 to 1961, Saddam Hussein spent most of his time reading. He was particularly interested in the life of famous men, including Stalin - who was his role model in this respect. Early in the 1970s, the future President of Iraq learned to use propaganda to further his own ends and those of the State. He disclosed in the press that his wife, Sajida, was working as a teacher while caring for their growing family. Photographs of him in his role as a good family provider began to appear. He arranged to be photographed with children whenever he would visit a factory or meet with groups of farmers. Saddam Hussein was building his image, carefully making sure that what he wore was impeccably suited to every occasion, especially his shoes. Said K. Aburish relates that his sense of decorum nonetheless compelled him to order newspapers not to publish his photos anywhere but beneath those of his

older brothers Bakr and Aflak, who were the country's leaders at that time. Even then, Saddam Hussein was using the services of a "ghost-writer," Aziz Mohammed Jassim, a prolific writer, who would continue to work for him until his mysterious disappearance in 1991.

Saad Al-Bazzaz, former head of the state-owned television network and editor-in-chief of the *Al-Jumhuryia* ("The Republic") newspaper until he defected in 1992, is well-versed in the main topics covered in the official propaganda. He explained that for three decades, the message has simply been: "Saddam and Iraq are one and the same. The President is the only one who can understand the Iraqi people and who can speak for all of them." In the 1990s, Saddam Hussein added a strong religious component to this nationalist and unifying propaganda. "In 1991, Saddam Hussein's policy shifted drastically. He ordered mosques built and based his ideology on religion to galvanise the population's morale, while secularism became the pillar of Ba'athist ideology," stressed the journalist, who lives in exile in London. Saddam Hussein's propaganda is now promoting a mixture of Arab, nationalist, Ba'athist and religious values.

In Iraq, the national calendar is overflowing with commemorative events and official ceremonies, all of which are widely covered by the state-controlled media and, in particular by the national television network. On 20 November 1997, when a Western bombardment seemed imminent, thousands of Iraqis were "spontaneously and voluntarily" retrenched within the Presidential palaces to serve as human shields. That day was entered on the official calendar as the "Day of the People." On 24 February 1998, Saddam Hussein agreed to open his Presidential palaces to United Nations inspectors. This change of heart prevented a confrontation and that day became known as "Flag Day." On 5 August of that year, on "Attitude Day," Saddam Hussein totally ceased to co-operate with the inspectors, resuming his backtracking strategy. When it comes to rewriting history, the regime never runs out of fresh ideas. Everything began on the "Day of the Noble Call," on 2 August 1990, when Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait. In memory of the Gulf War, the "Mother of all Battles," the government reintroduced "Science Day" commemorating 18 January 1991 - the date when the first Scud missile was fired at Israel - but totally ignored the cease-fire accepted by Iraq on 3 March 1991. The "Day of the Great Victory," or "Day of Days," is an older commemorative date marking the end (on 8 August 1988) of the eight-year war with Iran which, according to estimates, cost the lives of 360,000 Iraqis and Iranians and wounded 600,000.

Lastly, several dates have been set aside to honour the President himself: 15 October, the "Day of the Great March," which designates the first presidential referendum in 1995. At the end of September 2002, as the date approached for the second referendum that would result in Saddam Hussein winning 100% of the public's "yes" votes thanks to a participation rate of 100%, *Al-Zaoura*, a weekly published by the Iraqi Journalists' Union, suggested to the authorities that they dub the occasion the "Day of the Love Proclamation." The newspaper's editorial

suggested that, in the future, voters should not have to choose between “yes” or “no” but between “we love him a lot” and “we love him immensely.”

Saddam Hussein claims that he was born on 28 April 1937. This date has been an official holiday since 1980 and a pretext for several days of uninterrupted television coverage of the event. Like every member of the country’s other professions, journalists hold festivities to mark the occasion. On 28 April 2002, more than 250 journalists from Baghdad and outlying areas of Iraq came to the northern part of the capital to chanting songs in honour of the President’s 65th birthday in front of the former American Embassy, which had been closed for 10 years. “The journalists chose this site to celebrate President Saddam Hussein’s birthday so that they could express their defiance of the American administration, which is preparing hostile operations against Iraq,” claimed one organiser of the activities hosted by the Iraqi Journalists’ Union.

Control of the media: “an old habit”

The transformation of the Iraqi media into instruments of propaganda did not just happen from one day to the next. Saad Al-Bazzaz, an Iraqi journalist in exile in London explained that, at the end of the Ottoman Empire, as well as under the Monarchy, which was overthrown on 14 July 1958, the Iraqi press was one of the freest and most vibrant in the Middle East. The Baghdad radio stations and the press played an active role in the intellectual emulation of that period, primarily by promoting Arab nationalist ideology. Their influence was so pervasive that a portion of Kuwait’s Sunni merchant elite publicly petitioned, in 1938 and again in 1958, in favour of Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait.

One of the first Iraqi newspapers, published at the end of the 19th century, was called *Az-Zaoura* (one of the names for Baghdad). In the 1920s, dozens of dailies, weeklies, and literary magazines began to appear, including a satirical newspaper, *Habez Bouz*. This publication’s amusing name was “very popular with people in Baghdad, especially its cartoons,” explained an Iraqi who resides in Paris. The Iraqi population used to have access to most publications in the Arab writing world, a fact that accounts for the saying: “What is written in Cairo is printed in Beirut but read in Baghdad.” Many believe that the Iraqi press of the early 20th century rivalled with the Egyptian and Lebanese press.

After the 1958 revolution, the country fell into political turmoil and violence became a part of Iraqi life. Some 15 dailies appeared that were sympathetic to the leftist parties,

as well as to the Islamists, the Democrats, the Kurds, the Ba’athists and the Communists. But the press paid a price for its shifting allegiance, as each successive regime was overthrown: its freedom became increasingly limited. One Iraqi journalist who has been in exile since 1979 (and prefers to remain anonymous because his family is still living in Iraq) commented: “Even before the Ba’athists

took power in 1968, the ruling regimes were closing down newspapers whenever they pleased. It is an old habit!”

From 1959 to 1963, the regimes merely questioned editor-in-chiefs and temporarily withdrew the licence of certain publications, such as the communist daily newspaper of that time, *Ittihad Al-Shaab* (“The Union of the People”). As of 1968, the Ba’ath Party had spared only one paper, the *Al-Thawra* (“The Revolution”), which became the Party’s official publication. Tarek Aziz, the current Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, was its editor-in-chief for many years. Then, the Ba’ath Party, which needed to show more sympathy for the communists, again authorised their publications to be printed. The primary press organ of the Communist Party reappeared under the name of *Tarik Al-Shaab* (“Way of the People”). The newspaper of the Kurd Democratic Party at the time was *El-Taakhi* (“The Conciliation”). When the communists, in 1976, began criticising the restrictions that had been imposed upon them, Tarek Aziz appointed himself as the spokesman of Saddam Hussein in *Al-Thawra* and declared: “There is no place for a Communist Party in our country.” In 1979, after a new witch hunt that lasted for months, *Tarik Al-Shaab* and *El-Taakhi* were shut down. At that point, there was not a single newspaper left that was not pro-Ba’athist.

At the end of the 1970s, the methods used to control and intimidate journalists became extremely violent. Judicial harassment, arrests, threats, prolonged detentions and incidents of torture and executions increased dramatically. From 1980 to 1988, the war with Iran served as a pretext for a complete take-over of the Iraqi media by the state. In 1986, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) passed an Order (number 840) signed by Saddam Hussein himself, that imposes a death penalty on any person who insults or criticises the President, his entourage, the Ba’ath Party, the RCC, or even the government.

The International Alliance for Justice, a human rights organisation that is calling for the creation of an International Criminal Court to judge the Iraqi leaders for war crimes, has drawn up a list of the writers, artists, poets and journalists who have been murdered by Saddam Hussein’s regime. According to this organisation, over 500 of them have been executed since 1968 and hundreds more have been forced into exile. The *Iraq Press* agency, which has relations with the exiled newspaper *Azzaman*, reported that in the single year of 2001, 50 journalists fled the crackdowns initiated by Saddam Hussein’s older son, Uday. Saad Al-Bazzaz estimated that some 400 Iraqi journalists and press operatives are now living in exile, including the country’s most talented writers. As for the regime, it has a complete list of all journalists who have fled Iraq, whom it calls “traitors” and whom it does not hesitate to hunt down abroad. Since Saddam Hussein became President of Iraq, dozens of journalists have disappeared and only the Baghdad government knows what has become of them.

The names of bygone publications are very similar to those that exist today: *Al-Thawra*, (“The Revolution” - the Ba’ath Party’s official press organ), *Al-Jumhuryia* (“The Republic”), *Aleph Ba* (“A-B”) - a popular weekly - *Al-Ittihad* (“The Union”),

Al-Zaoura (the Iraqi Journalists' Union's weekly), etc. "Each newspaper may be even more state-controlled than the next, but there are certainly a lot of them!" confirmed one political exile, who has been closely monitoring developments in his country since 1979.

Terror tactics and crackdowns targeting journalists

In the 30 years since the Ba'athists began using coercive tactics, "the journalists have known without being told what they had to write. A minority among them wholeheartedly support Saddam Hussein and his regime. Most of them have just had to put up with the situation. They have a family, children, have been unable to leave the country and live in fear," explained one Iraqi journalist currently living in Paris. Today, it is Uday Saddam Hussein - the President's oldest son - whose duty is to keep the journalists at bay. His methods: corruption and terror.

Saad Al-Bazzaz, who held high-ranking positions in the Iraqi media until 1992, said that it was "extremely difficult to be a journalist. Like the majority of my colleagues, I suffered enormously. We would pretend to be sick so that we would not have to write, or so that we could leave to get medical treatment abroad." He mentioned the name of several of his colleagues who had to endure imprisonment or torture in the 1990s. Among them, journalist Aziz Mohammed Jassim, who worked from 1979 on with the *Al-Qadissiya*, *Al-Ghad* and *Al-Thawra* newspapers and mysteriously vanished in 1991. No one knows what has become of him. Dahud Al-Farham, on the other hand, was imprisoned several times in 2002 and 2001 for being critical of Iraq's economic situation and the bureaucracy. Hachem Hasan, editor-in-chief of the *Al-Thawra* daily, was accused of being an "indirect critic" of the regime. He was arrested in 1999 while travelling to Jordan with the intent of fleeing the country. After being tortured in prison, and eventually released, he went into hiding in Iraqi Kurdistan. He now lives in Jordan.

What distinguishes the coercive methods used by the Iraqi authorities is that they not only target particular individuals but their families and communities as well. On 24 January 2002, the State Iraqi satellite television channel broadcast images of the terrified faces of the family of Faiq Sheikh Ali, an Iraqi lawyer, writer, and journalist living in London. Several weeks earlier, the latter had participated in a prime-time television programme, "Conflicting Views," on the *Al-Jazira* channel. At that time, Faiq Sheikh Ali had denounced human rights violations and crimes being committed by the Iraqi government. His brothers, his sister, and his parents were immediately arrested. When the Iraqi authorities presented them on the satellite television channel they threatened the lawyer with reprisals. His own mother announced that she had disowned him and that his sister would pay for his "mistake," meaning that she was being threatened with rape. According to sources working with *Al-Jazira*, Feysal Al Qasim, the show's host, was also said to have received death threats that would be carried out if he continued to give airtime to Iraqi opponents.

According to Saad Al-Bazzaz, "Iraqi journalists have found ways to circumvent the restrictions placed upon them and report the news in a clandestine way." Many poems and short stories are being published in the Iraqi press and in "each of them, the poets never fail to include a butcher character. More of the truth is being revealed in this fiction than in newspaper articles." The scope of these acts of resistance is limited: only the country's elite and intellectuals can decipher such messages, while the majority of Iraqis are only focusing on the flood of propaganda being spread by Iraq's totally censored media.

"The Iraqi press prints only one version of the truth," reported one foreign journalist just back from Baghdad. "Whether you read one newspaper or another makes absolutely no difference." But, as one Iraqi expert pointed out, there are so many state-run newspapers that this allows the country to save face and provides work for the many journalists who were trained in the 1970s." It would be futile to hope to see more news on television. Although the latter has existed since 1957, the Iraqi audio-visual landscape is monotonous: it consists of four state-controlled channels. The national channel, *Iraq Television*, devotes a large portion of its programming to the President's every move. Another broadcasts pirated copies of Egyptian - and even American - movies and soap operas. The *Iraq Satellite TV* channel was launched in 1998. Lastly, the *Shabbab TV* channel (television for young viewers) is one of the novelties introduced in the media sector, in the 1990s, by Saddam Hussein's oldest son. In fact, the channel retransmits some programmes that are broadcast over Qatari's *Al-Jazira* channel.

Uday Hussein: "dean of journalists"

After 1991, Uday Hussein began to play a dominant role in the censorship and in crackdown on the media. Known for his inappropriate outbursts and brutality, Uday Saddam Hussein - the spoiled son - was born in 1965. Schoolmates have mentioned that he spent most of his time in school ordering his teachers around. While he was a university student, his bodyguards were ordered to seize any cars more beautiful than his own. After an assassination attempt on his life in 1996 that left him partially paralysed, Uday Saddam Hussein gained a reputation for drinking more than he should. In October 1998, drunk and in a screaming rage, he murdered Hanna Gogo, his father's taster, during an official ceremony attended by the wife of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Uday Hussein had reproached Hanna Gogo for having introduced his father to Shamira Shabandar, who, in 1986, had become Saddam's second wife. Stories about Uday Hussein's misconduct during the Iran-Iraq War were legion but his latest crime exposed him to the Iraqi people as a leader whose cruelty was to be feared even more than that of his father. Saddam Hussein reacted to the public outcry by first locking up his son and then exiling him to Switzerland for four months. The press gave full coverage to these punishments. Later, his mother, Sajida, interceded on his behalf and Uday Hussein was allowed to return to Iraq and was given a presidential pardon.

“Unanimously” chosen to head the Iraqi Journalists’ Union, in 1992, Uday Hussein attempted to modernise the official media and revive the regime’s propaganda. The methods used by this man who insists on being called Iraq’s “dean of journalists” are frightening. In his capacity as President of the Iraqi Olympic Committee, he has access to a torture chamber on the Committee’s premises whose refinements have become all too familiar to several journalists. Saad Al-Bazzaz claimed that “the Union was effective until the 1980s, until Uday turned it into the organ of a police state and a censorship annex to boot.” The Union is reputed to have about 2,000 members. Joining the Union, though not officially compulsory, is “strongly recommended.” Anyone who refuses to join may be fined. This organisation is used as a means to keep a close watch on journalists while at the same time award them with prizes and privileges. The Journalists’ Union seems to be more active than the Ministry of Information itself in conveying editorial instructions to journalists. One Iraqi who sought asylum in Paris commented: “As far as the media sector is concerned, Uday rules the roost - much more than Mohammed Said Assahaf [the Iraqi Minister of Information] ever has.”

In addition to being the General Secretary of the Journalists’ Union, Saddam Hussein’s son became a media magnate in just 10 years. He now supervises or manages a dozen weeklies, several dailies, a television and an FM radio station. But his undisputed greatest achievement was launching the *Babil* newspaper. This daily, which was created during the Gulf War to sustain the morale of the Iraqi troops, has become the most influential paper in the country. At the end of 2002, the newspaper’s selling price was reduced to 250 dinars (about \$0.12) so that “as many people as possible hold it in their hands.” This latest arrival among Iraq’s official newspapers serves as some sort of voice of opposition within the political system. It offers readers a wider coverage of international events, as observed through the lens of its owner who uses it to touch upon certain subjects that would otherwise be banned. In the opinion of one Iraqi journalist in Paris, “Saddam Hussein needed a newspaper in which he could send messages that he could not say himself. If Saddam Hussein wanted to attack Syria, for example, he would do so in the *Babil* and the Arab brothers’ friendship would be preserved.”

The book entitled *The Son of the President told me*, by journalist Hachem Hasan, claims that *Babil* is frequently used as a vehicle to promote the Uday Hussein’s political agenda, or to settle accounts with his enemies. Among the latter are members of the administration and government - particularly the Ministers of Information - whom he likes to contradict and publicly ridicule. Hachem Hasan tells how, in the 1990s, Uday Hussein orchestrated the dismissal of the Information Minister, Abd al-Ghani Adb al-Ghafur, whom he had nicknamed “Abdu.” Uday Hussein arranged to have published in *Babil* a totally fabricated piece of information attributed to *Agence France-Presse*, according to which this Minister who “was so set in his ways” was against certain reforms and was insufficiently educated for his office.

In reality, *Babil*'s freedom of tone is merely an indication of the kind of power enjoyed by Uday Hussein. From 20 November to 20 December 2002, the Ministry of Information shut down the newspaper by order of the Iraqi presidential cabinet. "Saddam was afraid that his son might have gone too far by criticising the Syrian and Jordanian Heads of State while the latter were pleading Iraq's cause before the United Nations," commented one exiled Iraqi journalist. Another report suggested that *Babil* may have triggered Saddam Hussein's anger by attacking the (majority) Shi'ite community in the country. While the American menace grows more insistent, Saddam Hussein is trying to make the Shi-ites overlook the repression to which they have been subjected since 1979, in order to avoid a repetition of the 1991 Shi'ite and Kurd rebellions. This episode proves that his father is ultimately setting the limit of Uday Hussein's power over the Iraqi media.

Iraqi population's limited access to the news

The population of Iraq thus has only marginal access to the news, which must first be approved by the official media. The latter did not even mention, for example, that UN inspectors Dr. Hans Blix and Mohammed El Baradei returned to the country on 18 November 2002. In 1993-1994, the regime banned the household use of satellite dishes. Despite the warning, a few people in Baghdad have installed home-made dishes. They are mounted out of sight, behind water reservoirs, on rooftops, or in the back of gardens. Some families can therefore secretly watch *Al-Jazira* and Western channels. "The security forces are letting them get away with it not because they have become respectful of citizens' rights, but because they have more urgent priorities right now than to chase down satellite dishes," said another exiled journalist. In November 2002, Saddam Hussein nonetheless reminded the public of the ban against owning satellite dishes. In a speech read by a newscaster on Iraqi television, he invoked religious justifications for the ban and added that "publicising the opinion of others (...) despite the fact that they are enemies - not friends - will be treated as an act of sabotage." Only foreign media, embassies, and high-ranking state dignitaries are permitted to use satellite dishes in Iraq.

The Iraqi people can only access the Internet - which was introduced late in 1999 - and electronic messaging through the government's server and in the 30 or so Internet centres scattered around the country. The authorities are constantly monitoring these Internet cafés, as their principal objective is to censor any information leaving the country. Access to sites such as "Hotmail" is outlawed and anyone attempting to connect to his or her own mailbox is subject to fines. Administrative red tape and prohibitive costs make it virtually impossible for most Iraqis to access the Internet and dissuade anyone from accessing the Internet from home.

Notwithstanding, Saad Al-Bazzaz asserts that the Iraqi population is not totally cut off from the rest of the world. "That was actually the case 10 years ago, when the population solely had access to whatever rumours the regime chose to circulate. But

that is no longer true today. People have small radios that they can use to hear programmes broadcast in Arabic by *Radio Monte-Carlo* and the *BBC*. They hide to listen to the radio but the regime has never been able to totally ban transistors. The Iraqis have a rough idea of what is going on in the world but no way at all to express what they think about it.” There are also more and more people listening to *Radio Sawa* (“Together” in Arabic), whose musical programmes are very popular. Initially launched as music-only station and transmitting over the airwaves of a station subsidised by the American government, it had to devote some air time to American officials. In March 2002, this new station replaced *Voice of America* in the Middle East. The Americans built gigantic transmitters in Cyprus, Kuwait, and one in Djibouti (still under construction), so that its broadcasts could be heard in Persian Gulf countries, Egypt, and Iraq. Although most listeners in Arabian countries tune into this radio station for its music, the Iraqis also manage to glean some news from it.

One well-known exception is that the press is thriving splendidly in Iraqi Kurdistan. Inside this territory, which is the size of Switzerland, there are vast quantities of newspapers and magazines, two satellite TV channels, some 20 local TV channels and a dozen radio stations. Unfortunately, although these media—unlike their Iraqi counterparts—are enjoying real freedom—they actually constitute a militant press funded by political parties.

The Iraqi press in exile reflects the divided Iraqi opposition

Like the Iraqi opposition, the Iraqi press in exile is disparate and politically highly fractionalised. There are about 20 newspapers, published occasionally and at irregular intervals, as well as radio and TV channels. Most, but not all, of these press organs are based in London. Opposition media subsidised by Arab regimes that are adversaries of Iraq, by Iran and by the United States, are appearing in the United States, Europe and in Syria.

In May 2002, the *Liberty TV* station of the Iraqi National Council (INC) which comprises members of the primary opposition parties in exile, stopped broadcasting. The funds approved by the U.S. Congress had not been paid since the month of February. *Liberty TV* was founded with financial support from Washington in September 2001. Its programmes, broadcast from Western countries, could be viewed in Iraq, the Near East, Europe and in certain African and Asian countries.

One of the largest and most financially sound newspapers, *Azzaman* (“The Times”), was founded in 1996 by Saad Al-Bazzaz, who is now its editor-in-chief. “While I was still in Iraq, I wrote a book about the invasion of Kuwait called *The Gulf War and the One After*. When the book was released at the end of 1992, I was in Jordan. I had made all the arrangements to enable my wife and children to flee the country, so we defected. Since then, I have never returned to Iraq. The regime sentenced me to death *in absentia* and stripped me of all my civil rights, including my Iraqi

citizenship," explained Saad Al-Bazzaz. He added that the regime has twice attempted to have him murdered but that he is no longer afraid to openly express his opinions.

The majority of the *Times*' news staff - about 30 people - who work in an office located in the western suburbs of London, consist of Iraqis who fled their homeland in the 1990s. The newspaper pays special attention to news developments in Iraq but not everyone considers its information to be reliable. Asked whether or not the press in exile is paving the way for the revival of the Iraqi press, Saad Al-Bazzaz expressed mixed feelings: "Yes and no. Unfortunately, the newspapers in exile are not radically different from the official press in Iraq and harbour the same totalitarian style. Each paper expresses just one opinion and disqualifies all others from the outset. Just as Uday controls the press in Baghdad, mini-Uday's control the press in exile."

Foreign journalists under surveillance

While the Iraqi crisis is the centre of attention for media around the globe, the work that foreign journalists are doing in Iraq is being closely supervised. The journalists are constantly monitored and each of their trips outside of Baghdad must be approved in writing by the Ministry of Information. In addition, the same law enforcement system that imposes fear and silence on the population makes gathering information an especially delicate matter.

The Iraqi regime's first method of exerting pressure is to require anyone wishing to enter the country to obtain a visa. When the regime desires to improve its public image, it makes it easier for foreign journalists to be issued a visa. The Baghdad authorities consequently granted some 500 one-week visas so that the international media could cover the presidential referendum of 15 October 2002. The journalists were even permitted to remain in Iraq for an extra week. But the rest of the time, the journalists are subjected to endless administrative red tape and arbitrary treatment by the Iraqi authorities. For example, the visa application submitted by Reporters without Borders in early January 2003 received just one response - an officious one - "When we need foreign journalists in Baghdad, you will be issued visas."

However, obtaining a visa in proper and due form is a necessary step for journalists, as shown by the misadventure that befell one Indonesian reporter. On 3 February 2003, Mohammed Dahlan, a journalist with the *Surya* daily, based in Surabaya, was briefly detained by Iraqi guards before being sent back to Jordan. The Indonesian Embassy in Amman confirmed that the journalist had entered Iraq without having in his possession the visa and documents that every foreign journalist must have. The *Surya* daily reported that the journalist has allegedly been accused of being a spy—a crime punishable in Iraq by the death penalty.

For several months, journalists from all over the world have been travelling in increasing numbers to Amman (Jordan) in the hope of obtaining the right to legally enter Iraq. The wait is a long one and often futile, as it was for this Western journalist who decided to give up and go home after spending 10 days in the same place: "I thought it would be easier to obtain a visa in Amman but it seems that there is no apparent consistent logic in such matters." The press attaché with the Iraqi Embassy in Amman, Jawad Al-Ali, is asking media professionals to send their requests, in writing, directly to the Iraqi Ministry of Information in Baghdad. If the visa application is accepted, the visa will be issued by the Iraqi Embassy in Amman. Jawad Al-Ali stated that the Embassy is "indiscriminately" issuing 12 to 13 visas a day to foreign journalists, after receiving authorisation to do so from the Ministry in Baghdad. He estimated that there were about 350 foreign journalists in the Iraqi capital during the month of January 2003.

Obtaining the visa may not mean that all problems have been resolved. Once in the country, journalists are forbidden to take any pictures of an official building, mention any sensitive topics or discuss politics. A former head of the *Agence France-Presse* Middle East bureau recalled that working in Iraq has always been difficult, just as it is in most Middle Eastern countries. "It is a land-locked country that is more difficult to travel to than, say, Syria. But more importantly, it has always been a tightly-controlled country. For example, no one could leave Baghdad without permission. The Iraqi authorities considered our correspondent to be an officer with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and it was nearly impossible to convince them otherwise. Iraqi journalists who work for the foreign media are in a perilous situation. For a press agency, this means that they must closely monitor any news that they disseminate. They cannot rewrite any articles by national correspondents because that would place them in grave danger."

The offices of international press agencies and foreign media that transmit their news reports are housed in the buildings of the Iraqi Ministry of Information. Foreign journalists are accompanied by a *murafek* ("chaperone" in Arabic) who serves as their chauffeur, interpreter and censor. This official "guide," made available to foreign journalists by the Ministry of Information, discourages interviewed Iraqis from speaking freely and invites the journalists to film some subjects - but not others. Thoughts of being denied permission to work, or of being expelled, like the threats made against the American *CNN* network, are always present to keep foreign journalists in line.

Early in October 2002, a *CNN* team landed in Kurdistan (northern Iraq), in a territory under the protection of the United Nations. In order to enter this zone that is beyond the control of Baghdad, the journalists crossed the Tigris River in a bark, right under the noses of the Iraqi guards posted on the hill separating Kurdistan from Iraq, and decided to broadcast a film story on their crossing. The response from Baghdad - which took this initiative as an affront - was prompt. On 25 October, Iraq announced its decision to expel six journalists of the *CNN* network, including their Baghdad bureau chief, Jane Arraf. They were given until 28 October to leave the

country. Ms. Arraf, a Canadian national, was the only Western correspondent based in Baghdad, where the network has had an office for 12 years. On 26 October, the Iraqi Ministry of Information denied ordering the journalists' immediate expulsion. As proof of its good intentions, Baghdad declared that a group of foreign journalists had been invited to attend the Baghdad International Trade Fair (from 1 to 10 November 2002).

Since that incident, visas have been issued very sparingly and not for a period exceeding 10 days. The Ministry of Information stated that this decision is justified by the fact that the Baghdad Press Centre can only accommodate a limited number of journalists at any given time. Another explanation might account for the threats that have been made against *CNN*. The Iraqi authorities had, indeed, objected to the coverage by the American network of a rare demonstration in Baghdad, on 22 October, by dozens of Iraqis demanding to be informed of the fate of their relatives after the general amnesty decreed by President Saddam Hussein. In the special report, some *murafek* working with the Ministry of Information had been filmed while attempting to prevent the network's journalists from interviewing demonstrators.

In July 2002, the correspondent of the *Al-Jazira* network in Iraq, Diar Al-Umari, was forbidden to work for 10 days. This prohibition, which was eventually reduced to four days, was issued by the Iraqi Ministry of Information. The Qatari network was charged with using the expression "ruling party" when referring to the Ba'ath Party, instead of the official terminology, "Arab Socialist Party." The reaction of *Al-Jazira's* executives to this work ban was to temporarily close its Baghdad bureau. The Iraqi authorities - unable to do without the mass audience that the network commanded in Arab countries - recanted its decision on 24 July.

Anxious to rally Arab opinion to their side, Baghdad authorities are likely to be more well-disposed toward Arab journalists, who are allowed more freedom to work in the country, than toward Western journalists. But these strategic interests and this favouritism for "friend countries" do not explain everything. Arab journalists are also better equipped than non-Arabic-speaking journalists to elude the *murafek's* surveillance and interference. Any Arabic-speaking journalists who may be offered a chaperone upon arriving in the country are entitled to decline his services and say that they prefer working on their own, and the Ministry of Information will not insist.

Conclusion

Censorship of the Iraqi media, which has been the norm since 1958, changed in 1979 into a bloody crackdown on all journalists - including those who were loyal to Saddam Hussein and to the Ba'athist regime - who were subjected to imprisonment and torture... Some of them have mysteriously disappeared, which has reinforced the climate of fear and servility that media professionals have been experiencing.

Press freedom - which had shown promise at the beginning of the 20th century - has since been totally eliminated. Today, the role of newspapers is only to relay the official ideology of a Stalin-type dictatorship. Even the *Babil* daily, whose so-called unfettered tone conveyed an illusory sense of freedom, cannot quite conceal the effects of the coercive methods that have been used against the Iraqi media for the last 30 years.

As for foreign journalists, the obstacles imposed on their work and the pressures that they have had to endure have not yet degraded to the point of physical threats. However, in Iraqi Kurdistan, which is beyond the reach of Baghdad's control, the first incident of this type has already occurred. On 30 January 2003, a dozen American journalists were threatened by the Ansar al-Islam group (an extremist organisation with ties to the al-Qaeda). This terrorist group, which controls a small territory in Iraqi Kurdistan on the Iranian border, was urged by the American government to demonstrate the existence of ties between the Iraqi regime and the Al-Qaeda network. Some Kurdistan Patriotic Union (KPU) combatants had to evacuate the American journalists from their hotel in Sulaymaniyah.