

Iraq's prime minister suppresses media

By Bill Berkowitz

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Several days after the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) sent a letter to Iraq's interim Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, expressing concern over the formation of a new media regulatory commission that "reportedly will have the authority to restrict news coverage," the prime minister closed the Baghdad office of the Al-Jazeera television network for thirty days.

"Word of the new commission," wrote the CPJ, a New York-based, nonprofit organization working to safeguard press freedom worldwide, "came one day after Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari lashed out at Al-Jazeera and other pan-Arab broadcasters, accusing them of 'one-sided and biased coverage of the situation in Iraq.'" Zebari reportedly said that Iraq "will not allow some people to hide behind the slogan of freedom of the press and media."

Ibrahim Janabi, a former Baath party member and an intelligence operative under Saddam Hussein was appointed by Allawi to head up the Higher Media Commission (HMC), an agency that will determine operating regulations for Iraq's newly emerging media. The Commission – an agency comparable to the U.S. Federal Communications Commission – is currently in the process of establishing content restrictions known as "red lines" that could ultimately prohibit any criticism of the prime minister and other government officials, the Financial Times of London recently reported.

Since Paul Bremer, the American head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, packed his bags and left the country, Allawi, the U.S.-appointed head of the transition government, has been delivering a series of mixed messages to Iraq's media organizations: His announcement of the new media commission came about a week after he reversed an earlier US-imposed ban on Moqtada al-Sadr's newspaper, al-Hauza.

Sadr, however, could be back in the government's censorial crosshairs. After a recent sermon during which the young rebel Shia cleric "mocked" Allawi and called him America's "tail," Janabi "singled out" the sermon as speech that was unacceptable and said that stations that broadcast the sermon could be banned, the Financial Times reported. Janabi

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said that if Al-Jazeera, which aired part of the sermon, rebroadcasts the speech, “we will give them two weeks to correct the policy, and after that we will tell them sorry we need to close your office.”

More significantly perhaps, Prime Minister Allawi's appointment of Janabi came only ten days after Australian journalist Paul McGeough wrote a story in the Sydney Morning Herald charging Allawi with executing “as many as six suspected insurgents at a Baghdad police station, just days before Washington handed control of the country to his interim government.”

Informants told McGeough that Allawi – who denied the incident took place – “shot each young man in the head as about a dozen Iraqi policemen and four Americans from the Prime Minister's personal security team watched in stunned silence.”

“Dr. Allawi's office... dismissed the allegations as rumors instigated by enemies of his interim government,” the newspaper reported. While US officials in Iraq did not issue “an outright denial of the allegations,” an e-mail from Ambassador Negroponte said: “If we attempted to refute each [rumor], we would have no time for other business. As far as this embassy's press office is concerned, this case is closed.”

As a Baath Party member, Janabi spent “time as an Iraqi agent in London in the late 1980s,” Tim Judah reported in *The New York Review* in March 2003. “My cover was to be a graduate student in information science,” Janabi told Judah during a late-February interview in Amman, Jordan. Later, Janabi acknowledged that he had been “recalled to Baghdad and thrown into jail” and “a few years after [that] he was released [and] he fled to Jordan and joined” the Iraqi National Accord (INA), an opposition group founded in 1990 with the support of the CIA.

The new Higher Media Commission is poised to move into “the old information ministry building, which is undergoing refurbishment,” the *Financial Times* reported. “Many of the old information ministry's 5,000 former employees have welcomed” the Commission, hopeful they will be able to get back the jobs that had been “axed” by Bremer when he first arrived in Iraq more than a year ago.

The “independent media and communication committee established by Bremer to regulate the broadcast media would continue to operate,” the newspaper reported, although it would be “subject” to the Higher Commission's “advice.” Foreign reporters and networks will not be subjected to the commission's rules although they will be asked to “voluntarily” adhere to the regulations.

“The coalition-appointed board of governors for the state broadcaster, Iraqia, was also being absorbed into his committee,” Janabi told the *Financial Times*.

Iraq's television market is saturated by satellite television networks including the Qatar-

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based Al-Jazeera, Dubai-based Al-Arabia, Abu Dhabi TV and others that, according to Lebanon's Daily Star, are "serv[ing] up a 24-hour diet of Baghdad car bombings, Palestinian-Israeli clashes and regional political turmoil." While the United States-funded Al-Hurriah and Al-Iraqiya networks "try to counter the constant steam of negativity on the Persian Gulf Arab news channels with more positive spins on the news of the day," a new television network launched in June is unlikely to have to grapple with censorship.

Al Sharqiya – "The Eastern One" – is a satellite network staking its future on soap operas, music videos and reality TV, including "Labor and Materials," Iraq's first effort at "reality" television. "In 15-minute episodes," the Christian Science Monitor reported, "broken windows are made whole again. Blasted walls slowly rise again. Fancy furniture and luxurious carpets appear without warning in the living rooms of poor families. Over six weeks, houses blasted by US bombs regenerate in a home-improvement show for a war-torn country.

"The idea is simple: Take Iraqi families whose houses were destroyed. Rebuild their houses, filling them with new goods, all donated by viewers who respond to the message flashed at the end of the show. (Donations count as zakat, the one-fifth of yearly income all Muslims must give to charity.)"

Al Sharqiya, Iraq's first privately owned satellite channel, is owned by the London-based Iraqi media tycoon Saad Bazzaz, who also owns the Arabic-language daily Azzaman and "is reputed to have political ambitions," the CSM reported.

Currently in development is a program called "Blessed Wedding," which will finance the wedding of a young couple that is otherwise too poor to get married. "In exchange, the couple allows the show to tape their wedding, honeymoon and domestic life," Lebanon's Daily Star reported.

"Reality-based" television may become a popular staple in a country that continues to be beset by suicide bombings, outlaws in the streets, and a U.S. occupation force. While Al Sharqiya curries favor with the Allawi government, it will do little to keep the people of Iraq informed. The Committee to Protect Journalists is calling upon the Allawi government "to publicly clarify the role and function of the Higher Media Commission and to ensure that any official regulation of the media conforms with international standards for a free press."

Aidan White, the General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists recently said that "Democracy in Iraq will be won by defending human rights and the people's right to know, not by returning to the bad old days of censorship and intimidation of journalists."

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