

Iraqi TV debates in the run up to elections in May 2018

A discourse
analysis by MiCT

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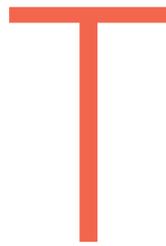
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Executive Summary



This report presents findings from a qualitative analysis of talk shows on 8 different Iraqi TV channels one week upfront parliamentary elections held on 12th of May 2018 in Iraq. The purpose of the study was to understand how types of media differ regarding the speakers invited, selection of topics and political positions, how “dogmatic” channels were when it came to alignment with a specific political agenda and how political rivals interact with one another in public. The research was conducted by MiCT on the request of Canal France International (CFI).

The findings of the study show that Iraqi media today feel free to criticize ruling elites, or to facilitate criticism of them. During the talk shows, speakers openly accused the sitting government, the parliament and political elites of corrupt practices and nepotism. At the same time candidates talked fairly and politely about their political competitors in public. Criticism of specific individuals was mostly articulated in a prudent and friendly way. Analysts said the new tone indicated the beginning of an era of anti-sectarian politicking in Iraq, one that is rooted in national pride about having defeated the extremist IS group together. There were other signs of national fraternity too, such as the harsh and far-reaching condemnation of ethno-sectarian politics by speakers across all channels and parties.

The level of external pluralism¹ found in the study was high. The media offered opportunities for all parts of the political landscape to present their candidates and their views. On the other hand, bias and political parallelism were identified as a weak spots in the overall performance of Iraqi media. While larger, nationwide channels such as Al Sharqiya, Al Sumaria and Al Iraqiya made obvious efforts to improve balance, pronounced bias was found among smaller local channels such as Fallujah, Al Ahad, Al Rasheed and Dijla. Small channels tended to select speakers and topics in accordance with the owner’s political agenda. The relative absence of contestation was a corresponding problem found by this study. Only very few channels engage in controversial debate about politically relevant issues. TV channels generally prefer the one-on-one-interview format with candidates or a set of speakers that belong to the same political camp. Accordingly, Iraqi voters rarely found opportunity to see candidates defending their political agenda against

¹ External pluralism is a phenomenon found in the media system as a whole while internal pluralism is understood as pluralism found in the coverage of individual channels indicating balanced unbiased journalism; see Voltmer, Katrin (2013): *The media in transitional democracies*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 179ff.



an antagonist or fighting for their party with argument. Al Sharkiya was identified as the only channel that made a difference by inviting political opponents and engaging them in critical and controversial debates.

By-far, the most widespread and commonly mentioned topic throughout the dataset was corruption – that is, the corrupt nature of political elites and the inability of past governments to evolve the political system for better governance. The facets of that topic varied broadly and different versions of it were mentioned in almost every talk-show. Particularly on the smaller channels the malpractices of the ruling elites were the centrepiece of all talks, and across ethno-sectarian divisions. In that same vein, all candidates essentially promised to fight corruption when elected - yet none of them presented any substantial program on how they would actually do so.

A call by religious authority Ayatollah Ali al Sistani for “new faces” had significant impact. The idea was that a new generation of politicians would solve the problem of corruption. But again, none of the speakers – new faces or not - presented a party program or specific political goals. In fact, candidates rarely promoted their party, or any political agenda related to their party or list, and preferred to stick to general analysis about the lay of the land.

One of the few groups that was openly promoted by their representatives was the Sairoun list that later turned to be the strongest alliance in the outcome of the elections. On Al Rasheed and Al Iraqiya candidates repeatedly highlighted the high and growing number of their followers. The Sairoun list also stood out by presenting only “new faces”, that is candidates that so far had no career in politics.

The only Kurdish channel in the sample, Rudaw, made a difference in almost all aspects of the analysis. Rudaw was the only channel that invited average citizens to exchange views on election issues. All four talk show episodes monitored included a high number of citizens that engaged in heated and controversial debates about the performance of the different Kurdish parties. Voters sometimes questioned the credibility of politicians but corruption was not a topic at all on the channels monitored. Candidates and voters alike focused on the rivalry between the big Kurdish parties KDP, PUK, Goran and newcomer the Coalition for Democracy and Justice. Rudaw, owned by Prime Minister of KRG Nechirvan Barzani (KDP), invited candidates from KDP and PUK alike.

On the May 12, 2018 Iraq held parliamentary elections to decide upon the 329 members of the Council of Representatives, who would elect the Iraqi president and the country’s prime minister. The elections revealed the surprising popularity of the Sairoun coalition, which brings together the Sadrist movement with the Iraqi Communist party. The election results were also considered a big disappointment for the Victory alliance headed by sitting Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who had led the successful fight against the extremist group known as the Islamic State, or IS, in Iraq.

Understanding the role of media in times of elections is of heightened importance since media have the power to promote or to marginalize parties, political positions and candidates, and hence to influence the outcome of elections. This power is accentuated in a media environment such as in Iraq, where almost all media are funded, financed or related to political parties. Iraqi media have the reputation to entertain close links with political parties and contribute to the exacerbation of ethno-sectarian conflicts in times of increased political tension. Yet, against the backdrop of the ongoing political transformation and a volatile geopolitical situation, knowledge about the state of media practices in Iraq needs to be updated frequently.

Media monitoring can provide insight into strategies, best practices and shortcomings of election coverage and deepen the understanding of the impact of media on the result of any election. Aiming to increase knowledge in this field, a qualitative discourse analysis was commissioned by CFI and implemented by MiCT one week upfront elections during the peak of campaigning. This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of 29 episodes of Iraq’s most popular TV-talk shows on 8 different channels, that represented the variations of the Iraqi media landscape. The purpose of the study was to understand how types of media differ regarding the speakers invited, selection of topics and political positions, and how “dogmatic” channels were when it came to alignment with a specific political agenda.

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1.1 Situation before Election Day

In the run up to the Iraqi elections, there were a number of events and factors that can be seen as potentially having an impact on voter behaviours.

The most significant of these was the security crisis sparked by the extremist group known as the Islamic State in June 2014 and its military defeat in 2017. After almost four years of fighting, visible manifestations of the extremist group had finally been pushed out of all Iraq's major cities and towns. The sitting government, headed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, was able to pronounce the end of this crisis in December 2017, only a few months before the election.

Although generally considered a technocratic kind of leader, Haider al-Abadi was seen as a victor by many Iraqis. Because of his apparent ability to negotiate sectarian alliances without prejudice, and his position as commander of an armed force that had regained prestige, he was popular with many ordinary Iraqis. Even though he leads a Shiite Muslim-majority government, he was also popular with many Sunni Muslim voters.

The security crisis had also given rise to a brand new political force: The Hashd as-Shabi. At the start of the security crisis, the country's Shiite Muslim spiritual leader, Ali al-Sistani, called for volunteers to defend their homeland against the IS group, given the apparent collapse of the Iraqi army. Thousands of Iraqis responded, creating what later became known as "Popular Mobilization Units" (PMU) or Hashd as-Shabi numbering an estimated 120,000 members in spring 2018.

Over the ensuing years, those mostly-Shiite Muslim militias evolved into powerful fighting units. They were not a homogenous group either – some professed allegiance to Iran rather than Iraq; the former had supplied them with weapons and guidance. Others remained loyal to al-Sistani and there were also smaller militias, made up of Sunni Muslim tribes who had resisted the Islamic State, or IS, group despite its sectarian appeals.

In early 2018, the militias were officially designated a semi-formal part of Iraq's security forces. As such, they were not allowed to run in the elections (the law says that no military group is). However, political parties were formed based on the different militias. Despite controversies about acts of revenge and unlawful activities, the militia members are also seen by many ordinary Iraqis as heroes – they were perceived as ordinary men, willing to sacrifice their lives for hearth and

² This chapter on elections in Iraq was contributed to the report by Cathrin Schaer

home – so their political activities were bound to attract support. Before the elections, analysts expressed concerns about the militarisation of politics and the potential for Iran to increase its influence in Iraq through the militias they supported.

While Shiite Muslim parties, politicians and forces appeared to be assurgent, Sunni Muslim forces were not. The security crisis had caused disarray among Sunni Muslim politicians, with many blaming one another for the rise of the IS group, as well as accusing one another of corruption, inefficacy and treason, among other things. Sunni Muslim parties were also severely hampered by the fact that a lot of the fighting over the past four years had occurred in Sunni Muslim-majority areas; it was there that the IS group had held sway. Huge numbers of locals in those areas had been displaced and were still far from polling areas, some cities had been destroyed and remained unsafe. There were concerns that Iraq's Sunnis might not be able to vote or might not get the required electronic voting ID cards which would allow them to access the new digital-only ballot system.

For the country's Kurds, the other major ethnic group in Iraq which has, in the past, held a "king making" balance of power in the country's parliament, an event separate from the security crisis, was likely to play a major role in how votes were given there. In September 2017, despite both internal and external opposition, Iraq's Kurds held a popular referendum on whether the semi-autonomous, northern region should secede from the rest of the country. Despite political infighting before the referendum, locals overwhelmingly voted in support of independence – even though, in many ways, it remains logistically impossible. The idea held an intense emotional appeal for the country's Kurds, while at the same time being fairly unrealistic.

The Iraqi government reacted forcefully just a few weeks later, forcing the Kurds to cede territory to its own military and imposed a financial and logistical blockade. The northern region that had once been described as the most stable part of Iraq and in line to become "the next Dubai", was forced further into an already-deep financial and political crisis. The existing power structure was rocked: the region's president, Massoud Barzani, resigned (although, many suggest, he did not give up any real power) and Kurdish politicians insulted and criticised one another.

Another major issue influencing Iraq and its people in the months before the election was the economy. In many ways this is a far more difficult, and longer-running,

problem to solve than the IS group's incursions. Iraq remains heavily dependent on the sale of its oil: it is a so-called rentier economy. There is not much activity done in the private sector. Many Iraqis are employed by the government in one way or another, and the government pays their salaries out of the country's oil income. After oil prices fell, the planned national budget fell well short of requirements. Oil prices have since rebounded somewhat but the inescapable costs of financing the security forces in the fight against the IS group, and now of reconstruction, has put a further burden on Iraqi coffers.

Additionally, corruption remains endemic in Iraq, its tendrils reaching from the very senior levels of the political sector to everyday transactions: nepotism and bribery are simply accepted as part of the way Iraq gets things done. This means that, for example, development and infrastructure projects are often not completed, or completed badly.

The economic problem, and the issue of corruption, was not unique to this Iraqi election cycle. However, they did add to locals' ever-increasing disillusionment with their political class and its apparent inability to get anything done.

This resulted in an ongoing series of protests and demonstrations, which have died down and flared up in an almost cyclical way over the past three years. Every summer, frustrated and unemployed, bedevilled by soaring temperatures coupled with a lack of power (to air condition homes, or cool food) and drought, Iraqis have taken to the streets to protest what they see as the government's inability to develop the country – even though, in the relatively recent past, oil prices have meant that there is enough money in the national coffers to do exactly that. Many ordinary citizens believe this lack of development and poor state services are due to political corruption, and this again provides them with further motivation to take to the streets and demonstrate their displeasure with their political elites. In May 2016, protests reached a peak when thousands of demonstrators in Baghdad (many allied with cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as secular groups and the Communist party) managed to break into the capital's fortified Green Zone, which houses government ministries and foreign embassies, and which is usually impenetrable. There appeared to be no central leadership heading the protest movement. The protestors expressed their anger at all parties and groups (that is, there was no ethnic or sectarian allegiance, just anger) and the

8 protestors' demands for reform were, in some cases, spurious and unachievable. Also worth noting: in the run up to the elections, many foreign analysts painted the ballot as a contest between international interests in Iraq—namely the US and Iran, with other nations like Turkey and Saudi Arabia (and other Gulf states) involved as well. It's unclear exactly how much impact the sympathy for, or antipathy against, any particular foreign ally had on Iraqi voters on election day. Certainly, the security crisis gave rise to a new sense of patriotism and pro-Iraq sentiment, while at the same time the Shiite Muslim militias allied with Iran have made it very clear where their loyalties lie.

1.2 Election Day, May 12, 2018

In many ways, the country had united to fight the cruelty of the IS group. There were obviously still plenty of examples of Iraqis wronging one another during those four years. But there was also a feeling that cross-sectarian elements of the Iraqi army – for example, the counter terrorism units – had played a large and merciful role in rescuing any and all Iraqis. The sectarian nature of society was somewhat relegated to the side-lines of the political discussion. Iraqi patriotism was, if not most important, certainly more important.

Additionally, there was a minor trend for more secular politics likely emanating from the above attitudes. Several parties deliberately downplayed religious or sectarian connections.

Also, shortly before the elections, the country's Shiite Muslim religious leader, Ali al-Sistani, made a significant statement saying something along the lines of "he who has tried before, should not try". This was interpreted to mean: vote for newcomers in the political system. Later, on May 4, al-Sistani also appeared to give credibility to the "stay home" campaign. In previous elections he had said it was the duty of every citizen to vote. This year, he said it was a choice.

For some time, the feeling had been growing that voters wanted change. That cross-sectarian mood and the desire for "something new" was reflected in the formation of several unusual political alliances in the run up to the elections. For example, al-Sadr's unexpected

and curious alliance with the country's Communist party. In terms of strategy, this ticked many voters' boxes: it was new, it was seen as clean (because the Communists had never been in power) and it crossed traditional sectarian and political borders. There were other notable movements, such as al-Abadi's Shiite Muslim alliance campaigning in northern Iraq – which was the first time a Shiite Muslim party had directly tried to appeal to Iraq's Kurds (who usually just vote for Kurdish parties).

At the same time, the back-biting and infighting around issues like who was responsible for the rise of the Islamic State, who was associated with foreigners (such as Iran, Turkey and the US) and corruption, meant that formerly united groups of politicians were split. Once-homogenous, large blocks of Shiite or Sunni or Kurdish MPs and parties split into smaller groups that also include (or possibly just pay lip service to) other ethnicities and sects. For example, leading Shiite Muslim parties that once agreed with one another were now boasting about the fact they were running independently, rather than with former Shiite allies. The same splits were visible in almost every formerly homogenous group – Sunnis, Kurds, Shiites and even smaller groups, such as the country's minority Christian parties. The main players during election campaigning were:

Nasr (Victory) – led by current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi

Sairoun (Progress / On the Move) – led by cleric Muqtada al-Sadr (predominantly Shiite, plus secular and civil society groups)

Fatah (Conquest) – led by Hadi al-Amari, linked with Shiite Muslim militias that evolved during the security crisis

The Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Also important, Kurdish opposition party, Goran (or Change)

State of Law alliance – led by former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki (a political rival to al-Abadi)

Wataniya (National) alliance – led by former prime minister Ayad Allawi (although Allawi is Shiite, its seen as a cross-sectarian list and is popular with Sunnis).

Hikma (Wisdom) alliance – led by cleric Ammar al-Hakim (mainly Shiite alliance)

Al Qarar (Decision) alliance – led by senior Sunni Muslim politician, Osama al-Nujaifi

On election day, the vote itself proceeded relatively smoothly with only isolated incidents of violence. There were some initial issues with the new digital voting system which replaced the old paper ballot system, and prevent any potential whatsoever for electoral fraud. These appeared to be resolved fairly quickly. Many commentators noted the quiet atmosphere.

1.3 The situation after Election Day

The results of the vote were quickly available – within three days – partially due to the new digital system. The results surprised many who had predicted that Haider al-Abadi's popularity as commander of chief of the army that had vanquished the Islamic State would see him re-elected. In fact, it was the unusual alliance – called Sairoun (or On The Move / Progress) - between Muqtada al-Sadr and the Communist party that got the most votes. They were followed by the Fatah (or Conquest) alliance comprised of political representatives of the Shiite Muslim militias. Haider al-Abadi's alliance, Nasr (or Victory), came third.

Another significant result: a large number of voters in a predominantly Sunni Muslim province – Ninawa, of which Mosul (formerly held by the IS group) is the provincial capital – crossed sectarian lines and voted for al-Abadi, instead of their "own" Sunni Muslim representatives. There al-Abadi's alliance won a majority of seats.

In the semi-autonomous, northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan, the established parties – the KDP and PUK – got most of the votes, despite the various events of the past six months that would ostensibly have made them less popular.

Almost immediately there were also accusations of electoral fraud, mostly in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Sunni Muslim-majority areas. This is hardly surprising - these kinds of accusations are made after every Iraqi election. Some of the accusations appeared to be credible and

there were reports that the physical ballots did not match the digital count. Others of the accusations were most likely politically motivated. A recount was ordered and the commission set up to oversee the elections was dismissed and replaced by members of the judiciary from around the country. As this report was being written, the recount was still in process.

The elections also saw a record low voter turn-out, with only 44.5 percent of the around 20 million eligible voters having their say. In 2005, there was a 70 percent turnout and in 2014, a 60 percent turnout. Voter apathy can be seen as a reflection of general dissatisfaction with Iraq's political class or, as many ordinary voters have been heard to say, "the elections never bring any change so why bother?".

2

Recent developments in Iraqi media

10

As in many other countries of the region, most media outlets in Iraq today are financed, supported or run by political parties. Examples include Al Ahad, a TV channel run by the militia, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (The League of the Righteous) and the Sunni-backed channel Fallujah TV, which was established and is run by Khamis Khanjar, an influential Sunni politician. TV channel Al Furat was operated by religious organization and political party Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council until the latter changed into the Hikma (Wisdom) alliance. Every relevant Iraqi party and every movement is operating one or more media channels. This results in a highly partial but at the same time pluralistic media environment accessible to all strands of society. Recently there has been a proliferation of new media channels, mostly backed by Shiite Muslim groups such as Al Etijah (Iraqi Hezbollah party), Al Ayam (Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq), Al Rased (Haider al-Abadi's wing of the Dawa Party) and Al Ghadeer (the Badr movement), resulting in a tangible amplification of Shiite voices across the media landscape.

Some channels entertain only loose links with ethno-sectarian camps like Al Sharqiya which is owned by media mogul Saad al-Bazzaz and which is considered a moderate, pro-Sunni channel with a critical attitude towards the Iraqi government. Al Sharkiya is known to be among the most popular channels with an equally strong reach in all parts of the country.

Due to the weak advertising market and missing infrastructure for advertising business in general, there are very few independent media outlets. In fact, only some print products can be seen in this category. The Al Sumaria channel was once known for its independence from party sponsoring until Ahmed al-Maliki, son of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, became a major shareholder in the popular channel. Despite a strong focus on entertainment, Al Sumaria used to deliver fairly balanced news coverage from its headquarters in Beirut to an Iraqi audience. Today, it would be fair to say that there is no independent unbiased voice within the TV sector.

TV channel Al Iraqiya does not make a difference in that regard despite its legal standing as a public service broadcaster. Al Iraqiya was established by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 in order to represent the diverse political camps and ethno-sectarian minorities in Iraqi society. But soon after its foundation, the first and then all subsequent governments started using Al Iraqiya as a mouthpiece to promote their own decisions and to influence the public opinion in their

favour. Accordingly, Iraqi media users perceive the channel as an instrument of government communication and people watch it mainly to stay informed about the current state of government politics.

One can summarize by saying that the Iraqi media landscape is mainly characterized by a high level of political parallelism and partisanship among the very many media outlets that emerged since the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime in 2003. The level of state control is rather low while the vast number of players from different political backgrounds indicate an equally low level of media concentration. The question of bias and fragmentation is subject to the analysis in the study at hand and will be discussed in chapter 4.

Since the structure of the media landscape widely mirrors the political rifts in Iraqi society, the occasionally exacerbating impact of media on existing conflict in Iraq has been a subject of concern for media practitioners and international observers. However, research on this topic suggests that this kind of effect mainly occurs during times of political crisis.³ This was the case when Kurdish authorities decided to run a referendum on Kurdish independence in September 2017, and tensions between the Kurdish and Arab regions of Iraq increased dramatically. The sudden rise of anti-Kurdish racism among Arab speaking media was alarming to journalists and media users alike.

Press freedom remains an issue of concern as well. During his term of office, former prime minister Nouri al Maliki tried to silence oppositional voices and prevent journalists from covering events related to the Sunni protest movements. For example, in 2013, the Iraqi media commission (CMC) ordered government-critical media outlets such as Al Jazeera, Al Sharqiya, Baghdad TV, Falluja TV, Al Tagheer and others to close their offices in the country due to their empathetic coverage of Sunni anti-government protests in Hawija. In February 2011, when all major cities in all parts of the country from north to south were inundated by demonstrations against corruption and poor state services, journalists were attacked and arrested by security services for covering the protests.⁴

Alongside government pressure, the freedom of journalists to investigate cases of corruption and nepotism is limited due to the power of strongly armed militias that protect political party leaders from these kinds of allegations. A number of journalists have been attacked or killed after publishing articles on corruption

in which politicians or businesspeople are named in connection with bribery and other malpractices.

Additionally, during the fight against the IS group in Iraq in the years between 2014 and 2017, press freedom was challenged by a patriotism—from state as well as societal forces—that condemned any critical coverage of human rights violations during fighting. While the international media warned about non-state armed forces that engaged in revenge killings of Sunni civilians and other acts of retribution, local journalists were unable to report on these incidents.⁵

The legitimacy and efficacy of the fight against IS itself was basically uncontested in the local coverage by then. Analysts that worked on the media monitoring at hand said that a patriotic sense of unity among citizens and their media was actually strengthened after the demise of the IS group in June 2016. The defeat of the extremists weakened ethno-sectarian fault lines in the society and triggered a vehement rejection of ethno-sectarian politics in the public debates upfront elections.

3 Al-Rawi, Ahmed K. (2012): *Media Practice in Iraq*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan;

Al-Marashi, Ibrahim (2007): *The Dynamics of Iraq's Media*. In: Monroe Price & Ibrahim Al-Marashi & Douglas Griffin (Hg.), *Towards an Understanding of Media and Media Systems in Iraq*. Occasional Paper Series Number One. Center for Global Communication Studies, S. 68- 91.

4 Wollenberg, Anja / Sarah, El-Richani (2017): *In Defense of the Iraqi Media – Between Fueling Conflict and Healthy Pluralism*. *Global Media Journal* Vol 7 (1). www.globalmediajournal.de

5 Ibid.

This study is based on a qualitative content analysis of 29 episodes of Iraq's most popular TV-talk shows focusing on the selection of speakers and topics, as well as positions taken and the quality of the debate. Against the backdrop of theoretical considerations rooted in democracy theory the exercise took particular interest in the nature of political competition and contestation (To what extent are political positions challenged and defended in the talk shows?), selection of topics and positions (what topics/positions stood in the centre of public debate and which channels deviated from mainstream topics/positions?) and questions of bias and political parallelism.

The goal of the study was to find out how types of media differ regarding these aspects and how strongly specific channels seemed to support or oppose a specific coalition or specific candidates. In order to better understand the findings from the content analysis, the author of the study interviewed senior journalists from Iraq in December 2018 asking them if they had explanations for some of the evidence.⁶ In the conclusion, background knowledge about the popularity and reach of the media outlets as well as insight from these interviews was applied in order to articulate assumptions about the role of media in the elections 2018.

The methodology is based on a strictly qualitative approach. Consequently, the study does not allow for general statements on the performance of specific types of media in Iraq or the representation of political camps, positions and ethno-sectarian communities in the media upfront elections. Instead, the study examined patterns of selection, presentation and public communication.

In the selection of Iraqi channels to be included in the sample, reach and popularity were taken into consideration, with the aim being a sample from the most influential channels. At the same time the design of the sample acknowledges the importance of smaller channels with only local reach by including four of them in the monitoring and analysis. More importantly though, the sample was designed to mirror the political diversity of the Iraqi media landscape by including channels with very different ethno-sectarian leanings. Regarding the selection of programs, Iraqi experts were consulted to denominate the most prominent talk shows for each of the channels. The following eight channels and 29 episodes were part of the sample:⁷

⁶ Interviewees were selected from a group of senior journalists that participated in different workshops in Erbil in December 2018

⁷ See appendix for a detailed list of all shows.

Rudaw – funded and financed by the Prime Minister of Kurdistan, Nechirvan Barzani, the nephew of the former regional president Mahmoud Barzani. Talk shows monitored in Rudaw (4): Ten Questions and Matha Tafaloun (What are you doing?).

Al Sumaria – a private channel with headquarters in Beirut. Al Sumaria is the most commercial outlet in the Iraqi media landscape with entertainment programs dominating content. Ahmed al-Maliki (the son of the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki) owns shares in the channel. Talk shows monitored on Al Sumeria (3): Nashret Akhbar (News Bulletin) and Zawiya Ukhra (Another Angle)⁸.

Al Iraqiya – the primary satellite channel belonging to the Iraqi Media Network, founded in 2003 as an umbrella organization for Iraq's public service broadcasters (both TV and radio). Al Iraqiya started as a public service broadcaster but soon came under government control and content became increasingly partisan. Today the channel has a reputation for being the mouthpiece of the ruling party. Talk shows monitored on Al Iraqiya (4): The Road to Parliament and Al-Mashhad al-Siyasi (The Political Landscape).

Al Sharqiya – a private channel owned by Saad al-Bazzaz, a former crony of Saddam Hussein. Al Sharqiya is allegedly co-financed by Saudi Arabia and was banned in Iraq many times during the al-Maliki administration, due to government-critical coverage. Talk shows monitored on Al Sharkiya: Bil-Harf al-Wahed (As Said) and Studio 18.

Al Ahad – owned by Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Shiite paramilitary group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (The League of the Righteous). The channel was founded in 2014 to promote the legitimacy and power of the Shiite Muslim militias that evolved in Iraq during the recent security crisis. Talk shows monitored on Al Ahad: Bitawqeet al-Asima (Time of the Capital) and Quota.

Fallujah TV – owned by influential Sunni businessman, Khamis al-Khanjar, who sees himself as representing the interests of the Sunni community in Iraq. Politically, Khamis al-Khanjar has been working behind the scenes for years, but this year he decided to take part in elections after coming to an agreement with pro-Iranian Shiite parties. Talk shows monitored on Fallujah TV:

Murashahoun (Candidates) and Sijal Intikhabi (Electoral Debate).

Dijla – owned by the Karbouli family, namely Jamal and Mohammed al-Karbouli. The latter is the leader of the Anbar Is Our Identity alliance. Jamal al-Karbouli is a businessman and one of the most influential Sunni politicians behind the scenes. This year he entered the election and presented himself as a strong rival to traditional senior Sunni figures like Salim al-Jibouri, Khamis al-Khanjar and Osama al-Nujaifi. Talks shows monitored on Dijla: Al-Munawara (The Manoeuvre) and Qubat al-Shaab (People's Dome).

Al Rasheed – owned by Saad Assim al-Janabi, a Sunni businessman from Kirkuk. Al-Janabi is the leader of the Iraqi Republican party. He is known as someone who believes in Arab nationalism. The Republican Party formed an alliance with the Iraqi Communist party and Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Sadrist movement (and the Sairoun alliance) for the elections. Shows monitored on Al Rasheed (2): Al-Mashhad al-Akheer (The Last Scene).⁹

The week monitored (May 3 - 10, 2018) was the last week of election campaigning before the election was held on May 12. It is expected that all features of media behaviour and party campaigning are accentuated in that particular week and therefore the data would be particularly telling about the party-media-nexus in Iraq.

After defining the sample, two episodes of each talk show were recorded and then documented by Iraqi analysts according to predesigned categories. The categories required the analysts to take down information in the following categories:

- Name, length and title of the episode
- Names, titles and professional status (position) of the speakers
- Name of the moderator
- Extensive summaries of the statements of the speakers including direct quotations

⁸ Only one episode of the talk show Zawiya Ukhra was available during the week upfront elections.

⁹ On Al Rasheed only one talk show was available during the week upfront elections.

14 The data deriving from the recording and documentation were then analysed by MiCT experts according to these leading questions:

- Topics: What are the predominant topics on the channel? What are topics in the second range?
- Positions: What are the predominant positions/frames on that channel? What positions/frames are secondary?
- Diversity of parties: Which parties are represented on the channel? Which ethnic or sectarian communities?
- Political competition: To what extent do we find political contestation/controversy on the channel?
- What can be said about the deliberative quality of these debates: Do opponents use arguments to defend their positions? Is criticism based on arguments/facts or based on populist allegations/discrimination?

4.1

Summary: Topics, Competition and Bias

B

elow is a summary of the main findings of the study regarding the leading questions as outlined in chapter 3 (see above).

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Topics

The by far most widespread and commonly mentioned topic throughout the dataset was corruption, namely the corrupt nature of political elites and the inability of past governments to evolve the political system for better governance. The facets of that topic varied broadly and different versions of it were discussed in almost every talk-show. Particularly on the smaller arab channels, the malpractices of ruling elites stood centerstage across sectarian divisions. The replacement of current parliamentarians with “new faces” and the responsibility of voters to kickstart that change was presented as a solution to the problem by the speakers.

A great number of candidates referred to the fatwa – or religious edict - of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to “not test what already has been tested”. This was decoded by many speakers as the highest Shiite Muslim religious authority in the land instructing voters to pick somebody new and not to bother with any politician who had previously been in office.

The national channels such as Al Sharqiya and Al Iraqiya did not allow corruption to be the centre of all debates. Instead other issues related to foreign relations, sectarian politics and the analysis of past and present party alliances were highlighted.

Across channels and across alliances, a sizeable part of the discourse was dedicated to the decline of sectarian politics in Iraq. Speakers talked about the changing nature of Iraqi society and how politics are no longer sectarian. Candidates promoted themselves as anti-sectarian and argued that the Iraqi people were fed up with nepotistic politics and sectarianism.

Also important but less frequent was a discussion on the technicalities of the election process alongside concerns about external interventions that might harm the legitimacy of election results. Most of the speakers seemed confident that the voting process could be properly protected against security threats, fraud and technical problems. Also, less discussed were possible party alliances after elections and how these alliances might, or might not, take shape.

From a normative point of view, it is striking that corruption was treated as the main problem in Iraq today, yet no real solution was presented by any of the

candidates. While corruption was the issue for all parties to tackle and therefore a subject of political competition, no single party presented a proposal on how to solve that problem. According to many, the honesty of a new generation of politicians would bring corruption to an end and the responsibility therefore would lie with the voter.

One tangible suggestion for fighting corruption was brought by MP Hassan Shwairid, a leading member of the Wataniya coalition, who suggested an investigation led by an Iraqi committee and conducted by international consultants should identify “the thieves” and hold them accountable. Another proposal by Bashir Ghalib al-Hajimi, a candidate for the Democratic Civil coalition, was to curtail the privileges and salaries of MPs. However, measured against the actual size of the problem, these proposals look tenuous at best.

Oddly, corruption was rarely linked to the poor quality of state services (such as lack of potable water, power cuts, garbage collection, public works and so forth) that gave rise to nationwide civil protest movement. While the connection between the two problems seems obvious, it was picked up only once by a candidate from the Victory alliance.

While the victorious Sairoun coalition, like all others, did not offer any political program or technical solutions to fight corruption, they were among the few parties in the sample that actually presented “new faces”. None of the six candidates that debated on Al-Mashhad al-Akheer on Al Rasheed had been an MP before, none had a political career before joining the Sairoun coalition. Perhaps as a result of this, the candidates’ performances were strikingly weak when it came to political communication.

The debates on Kurdish channel Rudaw were focused on rivalry between the big Kurdish parties PUK, KDP and the newcomer Coalition for Democracy and Justice. In that same vein, the rift between Sulimaniya and Erbil was discussed in depth and how voters miss party competition in their respective regions. Power monopoly of KDP in Erbil and PUK in Sulimaniya is uncontested, voters say. While some of the voters invited to the discussion questioned the credibility of Kurdish politicians in general, corruption was no topic at all.

Competition

Contentious debate was mostly avoided by Iraqi TV channels. The channels monitored clearly preferred the one-on-one interview format or a selection of guests that shared political affiliations. Accordingly, the Iraqi voter

rarely had an opportunity to see candidates defending their election agenda against an antagonist or defending their positions with arguments.

Al Sharqiya and Rudaw were identified as the only channels deliberately striving to encourage political contestation and debate. Noteworthy also: on Al Sharqiya the quality of deliberation in terms of argument and explanations was comparatively high. Apparently, the quality of debate benefitted from the pressure that comes with genuine contestation. Rudaw invited a high number of average citizens to all episodes monitored. These voters engaged in heated and highly controversial debates over the performance of Kurdish parties, defending their favourite party and openly attacking others.

Despite the fact that the media monitoring was conducted during the peak period of election campaigning, none of the candidates actually presented a political program. Apart from some personal projects, no speaker promoted a real vision or tangible goals that his party, alliance or list stood for. Candidates rather behaved like analysts, explaining the nature of the party landscape and recent changes in the political culture. It was almost impossible to identify ideological differences between political blocs. This lack of contrast is heavily aggravated by the fact that all candidates across lists and alliances indiscriminately made the fight against corruption their main goal for the future (except KRG).

Candidates generally talked fairly and considerately about their political competitors in public. Criticism towards specific people was, if it happened at all, mostly articulated in a cordial and friendly way. Speakers even tended to say positive things before criticising someone else. However, the tone of criticism changed radically when directed towards larger groups of people such as “sitting MPs” or towards entities such as foreign states or the former government. In fact, any reluctance to be too critical disappeared when criticizing the performance of the former government and the integrity of political elites. Ever since al-Sistani’s edict “not to test what has been tested”, a complete dismissal of the political elites and a disgust about their immorality seems to have become commonplace. In this regard, offensive language was ubiquitous. “Corrupt”, “dirty”, “immoral”, “selfish” are only a few among many derogatory adjectives frequently applied to the ruling class.

Political Parallelism and Media Bias

Larger channels with nationwide reach, such as Al Sharqiya, Al Iraqiya, Al Sumaria, and Rudaw made an obvious effort to establish balance in their talk shows and they applied different strategies to do that.

Al Sharqiya invited candidates from a vast variety of different parties and even dared to engage in contentious debate. Also, two episodes of the show Bil-Harf al-Wahed were each dedicated to heavy-weight opponents in the current electoral competition: the sitting prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, and his internal foe, former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. Moderators challenged their guests with well informed and critical questions. Likewise, Rudaw invited an equal number of candidates from political rivals KDP and PUK. In addition to candidates, citizens were invited that promoted the whole range of currently existing parties.

Al Iraqiya invited experts, Islamic researchers and analysts instead of election candidates and avoided the promotion of al-Abadi and his current government, while allowing moderate government-criticism in the debate. Against expectations, the current government was not praised in any way by any of the speakers on Al Iraqiya.

Al Sumaria invited only a few candidates for short interviews and generally offered very few election-related programs at all. In fact, analysts could not identify two episodes of two talk shows on Al Sumaria in the week before elections for the media monitoring. While smaller channels increased the number of elections programs, Al Sumaria reduced them.

Among the smaller channels - Al Ahad, Dijla, Fallujah and Al Rasheed - the inclination towards specific parties was much more obvious. Most of the channels openly promoted specific parties without hiding their partiality. For instance, Al Rasheed only invited candidates from the Sairoun coalition on the talk shows monitored. On Fallujah about half of the speakers belonged to the Iraqi Decision coalition run by the channel's owner, Khamis Khanjar, a famous Sunni businessman engaged in politics. The other guests represented Sunni-backed parties such as Wataniya that could be considered a possible future ally for the Iraqi Decision coalition. Dijla and Al Ahad were less dogmatic about their bias, and also invited one guest each from parties that did not directly line up with the channel owners' own agenda. However, in one episode of the show Munawara (the Manoeuvre), the owner of Dijla, Mohammed al-Karbouli - who also happens to be the leader of the Anbar Is Our Identity alliance - was interviewed for almost 50 minutes about his political goals in the upcoming elections. Only one out

of six guests on Sunni-backed channel Dijla represented a Shia-backed alliance. The Kurdish channels only invited candidates from the Kurdish parties: The PUK, KDP and the New Generation movement.

The bias schism between smaller/local and larger/national channels is also mirrored in the content of the debates: While the smaller channels made corruption a central topic in all talk shows regardless of their ethno-sectarian affiliations, the bigger channels with the highest reach tried to apply a more analytical and less populist approach and vary the topics.

In this study, a strong ethno-sectarian bias was found mostly among the smaller channels of the sample like Fallujah, Dijla and Al Ahad (see chapter 4.1.1). This observation somehow exposes an essential contradiction in the reality of Iraqi politics: while candidates might promote the decline of ethno-sectarian politics and might present themselves as anti-sectarian politicians, the channels that facilitated their campaigns were mostly still working in line with the principles of ethno-sectarian politics they said they were abandoning. As long as this contradiction remains accepted and uncommented upon in the talk shows, the credibility of self-declared, anti-sectarian politics remains dubious.

4.2 Analysis in Detail

4.2.1

The smaller channels: Corruption as a dominant topic and a comparatively high bias

There were two major topics for the smaller channels to focus on: corruption and immorality among the ruling elites, and the end of ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq. These topics were a centrepiece of all debates on the small channels Al Ahad, Dijla, Fallujah and Al Rasheed. The smaller channels also showed a comparably high degree of bias toward whoever was funding them, as indicated by a far-reaching overlap between the channel owners' party affiliations and the selection of talk show guests.

On the smaller channels the discourse on corruption was based on general accusations regarding the integrity

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of the politicians, their accountability and their efficacy. People are disappointed about unfulfilled promises, speakers say. Voters have lost trust in the government because politicians do not care about their homeland: "The reason behind all the things citizens are not getting, are the MPs and ministers who are working for their own personal interests" said Ghufuran al-Anzi on Fallujah TV – a candidate for the Iraqi Decision coalition. She added that: "The basis of our work in the next government will be the previous experiences of successive governments in order to correct the course not to continue with the same mistakes." While accusations were harsh, the candidates rarely targeted any specific person.¹⁰

In one episode of Sijal Intikhabi (on Fallujah TV) the high salaries and privileges of MPs were specifically discussed. Bashir Ghalib al-Hajimi, a candidate for the Democratic Civil coalition, took a radical stance in this regard, demanding that in the future all MPs should swear an oath to refrain from salaries and privileges. In order to erase corruption, no MP should receive salaries or privileges, he suggested.

Al-Hajimi also told the audience about fraud he experienced personally during his time as a contractor for the Ministry of Construction and Housing: "Contractors are being blackmailed in the state departments and none of them gets a contract without allocating a certain percentage for some persons and parties."

Likewise on Fallujah TV, journalist Najm al-Rubaie accused Iraqi politicians of being the agents of foreign forces. The IS group, sectarianism, terrorism and corruption all entered Iraq with occupiers that tried to use Iraq to solve their domestic problems: "Iraq has become a bed for patients from abroad, holding grudges and foreign affiliations, identities and nationalities, that have nothing to do with us," he said, adding that, "everything that happened in the country was agreed upon, starting from Al Qaeda and ending with the IS group." In his view, local politicians had destroyed the country on behalf of foreign countries.

On Al Ahad and Al Rasheed almost all the speakers blamed the past government for corruption and accused it of complicity. All speakers emphasized the need for change and the replacement of the ruling elites by "new faces". Huda Sajad, a candidate for the Victory alliance, connected corruption to the poor quality of state services, adding that there is a relationship between poverty and corruption, and if corruption persists, Iraq will never recover and will remain a poor country.

Interestingly, candidates for the eventually victorious Sairoun coalition did not present any solutions, slogans or positions that differed from general talk about corruption. In fact, the candidates for the Sairoun coalition mainly just repeated the most common aspects of the existing discourse without adding anything unique: the previous governments have failed to rule the country and serve the people; the Iraqi people want change and new faces and they will vote accordingly; our alliance is against sectarian politics; voters will vote against sectarian politics.

Also on Dijla, the predominantly Sunni guests spent much time blaming and shaming past governments, including local councils in Anbar. Mohammed al-Karbouli, leader of the Anbar Is Our Identity alliance, started his talk by saying: "Previous governments have failed in the administration of the state, as seen by the people, but they do not admit their failure in the administration of files and ministries." The following positions are repeated frequently: Iraq needs new faces (and we have them). The past government has not served the people and has neglected Anbar. Past governments are corrupt and nobody trusts these people anymore. The fate of Iraq is now in the hands of the voters and the voters will do the right thing (vote for new faces and so forth and so on).

Across all of the talk shows, the idea of "new faces" was presented as a solution to the problem of corruption. Somewhat strangely, even senior politicians pledged to replace everyone. According to Kareem Abu Suda, a candidate for the National coalition, the new candidates needed to be honest and honourable. On the talk show Sijal Intikhabi (Fallujah TV) he said: "We hope that the voters will review and assess the candidates and their history and what they have achieved in the past period. The people must punish the former MPs by elections, because members of the Iraqi parliament are the only ones chosen by the people. I am optimistic because the public has become aware." This change in attitude and perception among the voters was mentioned in many other instances too.

While the Sairoun coalition, like all others, did not offer any political program or technical solutions to fight corruption they were among the few parties in the sample that actually presented "new faces". None of the 6 candidates that debated in Al Mashhad Al'akhir on the Sunni backed channel al-Rasheed were previously

¹⁰Exceptionally, the former minister of trade Falah al-Sudani and PM Jawad al-Shaihy are both directly accused of corrupt practices by Bashir Ghalib al-Hajimi on al-Fallujah.

Members of Parliament, nor even had a political career before joining the Sairoun coalition.¹¹

One tangible suggestion for fighting corruption was brought by MP Hassan Shwairid, a leading member of the Wataniya coalition, who suggested an investigation led by an Iraqi committee and conducted by international consultants to identify “the thieves” and hold them accountable. Another proposal by Bashir Ghalib al-Hajimi, a candidate for the Democratic Civil coalition, was to curtail the privileges and salaries of MPs. However, measured against the actual size of the problem, these proposals look tenuous at best.

On Dijla, a channel owned by the powerful Sunni Karbouli clan from Anbar, five out of six guests were Sunni politicians. Two were candidates of the Anbar Is Our Identity party, the alliance founded by Jamal al-Karbouli himself. Two guests from the Sunni-backed Baghdad list that is also openly supported by Jamal al-Karbouli, were invited onto one show. In one episode of the show, Munawara (the Manoeuvre), Mohammed al-Karbouli, the leader of the Anbar is Our Identity alliance was interviewed for almost 50 minutes about his party agenda. Most of the speakers were from Sunni Backed parties that the channel’s owners supported – that is, those belonging to the Anbar is our Identity alliance.

Noteworthy: The second episode of Munawara (the Manoeuvre) on Dijla was dedicated to a candidate from the Shia-backed Victory alliance. In a very long interview of almost 50 minutes, Aras Habib, head of the Iraqi National Congress, talked about the way he wants to develop his party, about threats to the election process and about changes in the party landscape. He was not treated any differently by the moderator than Mohammed al-Karbouli, the politician the channel is loyal to.

The following parties and alliances were represented in the Al Ahad shows monitored: three candidates from Conquest alliance (mainly Shia) that the channel’s owner also belongs to, two candidates from the Victory alliance (mainly Shia), the Baghdad alliance (Sunni majority) and State of Law (mainly Shia). Again, the guests were predominantly selected from parties supported by the channel’s owner. Yet, the variety of parties is still comparably high and with the Baghdad list, it also includes a Sunni-backed party.

Al Ahad and Dijla both selected guests in accordance with a political agenda, while at the same time occasionally inviting guests that do not fit that alignment at all. This strategy can be considered a tribute to the

growing anti-sectarianism among Iraqi audiences, analysts said.

On Fallujah TV about half of the guests invited to the talk shows belong to the Iraqi Decision coalition, to which the channel’s owner, Khamis Khanjar, also belongs. The Iraqi Decision coalition is led by senior Sunni Muslim politician, Osama al-Nujaifi. Khamis Khanjar’s own party is a member of this alliance.

Other guests were invited from other Sunni-backed parties such as the National coalition and Wataniya coalition. The only Shia guest was journalist Najim al-Rubaie, a candidate from the Bayariq al-Khair alliance, which is a Sunni-backed alliance. In summary it is safe to say that the speakers invited to the talk-shows on Fallujah represented the Sunni-backed political landscape in Iraq, with an emphasis on the Iraqi Decision coalition to which Khamis Khanjar belongs.

On Al Rasheed, during two episodes of The Last Scene (Al-Mashhad al-Akheer) six candidates from the Sairoun alliance were invited to speak. The Sairoun alliance is an ally of the Iraqi Republican party of Saad Assim Al-Janabi, a Sunni businessman from Kirkuk who owns the channel. The Republican Party formed an alliance with the Iraqi Communist party and Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Sadrist movement (and the Sairoun alliance) for the elections.

The two episodes monitored on Al Rasheed are a quite extreme example of an empty discourse, circulating mainly hollow claims and slogans not rooted in any kind of program. It is simple and unsophisticated party propaganda. The six candidates simply seem to declare what they think people want to hear.

In contrast to most of the other shows, the candidates on the Al Rasheed channel openly campaign for their party and directly call the voters to vote for the Sairoun alliance.

4.2.2

The bigger channels: Weak bias and a greater variety of topics

Regarding the failures of past governments, the larger channels, Al Iraqiya, Al Sharqiya, Al Sumaria and Rudaw differed from the smaller channels in that they did not allow corruption to become the simplistic and central

¹¹ Note: Al Rasheed only invited guests from the Sairoun coalition..

aspect of every debate. On Rudaw, the topic of corruption was not raised by any of the speakers or moderators at all.

On Al Iraqiya corruption was tackled on the second rank. Researcher Yassir al-Tarbouli quoted Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in regard to corruption, saying: "The religious authority has called on people not to elect corrupt and inexperienced persons who did not serve the people". In the only talk show hosting party candidates a representative of the Sairoun alliance and a candidate from the Victory alliance tackled the problem of corruption but with an emphasis on the future.¹² Aqeel al-Musawi, candidate of the Victory alliance called on citizens to "cooperate with the next government in the detection of corruption and corrupt persons who are destroying the state institutions" and said that "there should be a shared responsibility between the government and the citizens" in ending rampant corruption.

On Al Sharqiya, two out of four shows were dedicated to long interviews with individuals, the current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, and one of his rivals, the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, both of whom obviously share a high level of responsibility for the performance of past governments, and therefore have no motivation to join in the ubiquitous complaining about corruption and sectarian politics. Instead, al-Maliki spends time defending his rule, explaining in detail how public money was used only to improve public services and infrastructure. In this passage of the interview he actually denies there was any corruption during his regime.

In the two episodes of the talk show, Studio 18, Al Sharqiya hosted an open and lively debate that also includes criticism of the past government. Izzeddin al-Dawla, representing the Sunni-backed Wataniya alliance, lamented clientelism and the concentration of power in the cabinet. Hassan Shwairid (National coalition) blamed sitting MPs and their international allies and supporters for corruption, and the representative from the Sairoun could not miss the opportunity to condemn corruption as well.

On Al Sumaria, two interviews with representatives of the Sairoun coalition and the Iraqi Communist Party were very short and included only few remarks on corruption.¹³ One longer show was run by moderator Nabil Jassim without guests, who spoke mostly about electoral issues and Iraq's foreign policy. He did not mention corruption.

In conclusion, the variety of topics was much wider on the bigger channels than the smaller ones and corruption is just one among many other issues. An equally strong difference between the bigger and smaller channels is also found in regard to political bias, as mirrored in the selection of talk show guests. The big, national channels made an obvious effort to have a more balanced approach and used different strategies to achieve this.

Speakers on Al Sharqiya came from a variety of different parties, representing a comparatively broad ethno-sectarian/political bandwidth: Three candidates from the predominantly Shiite Victory alliance, one candidate from the Sunni-backed Iraqi Decision coalition appeared twice, and there were two candidates from the Sunni-backed Wataniya alliance along with one candidate from the Sairoun alliance, the newcomer that actually won the elections. In both episodes of Studio 18, opposing camps were invited in comparably big numbers to discuss relevant issues from opposing angles. Sunni-backed and Shiite-backed coalitions were almost equally represented.

The two episodes of the show, Bil-Harf al-Wahed, were each dedicated to one very senior Shia politician from different wings of the ruling Dawa party: Nouri al-Maliki (on May 8) and Haider al-Abadi (on May 10).

Somewhat strangely, the first show begins with the presenter pledging his allegiance to the sitting prime minister, Haider al-Abadi. He tells the audience he is not voting for al-Abadi the man, but for his style of politics, which he believes is what Iraqis need in the next government. According to analysts, this is the most important political show in Iraq. The journalist, Ahmad al-Mullah Talal, could be described as the Oprah or Jimmy Kimmel of Iraqi TV and viewers pay a lot of attention to him.¹⁴

Given the broad variety of parties, the high level of contestation and the comparably wide scope of relevant topics (as opposed to merely lamenting corruption and the malpractices of others) Al Sharqiya appears comparatively independent and balanced, particularly

¹²Note: Al Iraqiya otherwise hosted only analysts and experts in three out of four shows..

¹³Sumaria had very few talk shows on election topics in the run up to the elections. Therefor only three shows were included in the sample: two short interviews with party candidates and one long show run by Nabil Jassim only.

¹⁴Rumors say, al-Abadi paid him to do this. Analysts said it could be true because in the past Ahmad al-Mullah Talal campaigned with al-Abadi's main opponent, al-Maliki.

compared to most of the smaller channels that select their guests in a more partisan way.

Al Iraqiya is the only channel in the sample that hosted analysts on their talk shows. Three out of four talk shows invited solely guests who were not candidates in the elections, but external experts, academics or Islamic researchers analysing the electoral process. Only one TV debate involved political candidates. Interestingly, in this debate both Sunni and Shia candidates were invited and had the opportunity to present their viewpoints. In contrast to the other channels, Al Iraqiya did not only invite representatives of the big winning parties but also outsiders such as the Democratic Civil coalition and Bab al-Arab.

Although Al Iraqiya has the reputation for being heavily biased in favour of the Shia-backed government, the shows analysed in this study were all fairly neutral. There was no indication of a pro-government line as observed during previous elections. Only the fact that corruption was not in the centre of the debate and not as dominant a frame as on the majority of other channels, indicates a more government-friendly stance. Also, the government and parliament is not criticised as heavily as on other channels, particularly Sunni-backed channels. However, as on the other channels, the candidates of the parties supported the demand for “new faces” which can be read as an indirect, critical stance toward the current government.

On Al Sumaria, no bias toward any particular party could be identified. In the two episodes of The News Bulletin, candidates from Wataniya coalition and from Sairoun coalition were invited for political interviews – two parties representing opposing camps in the political landscape. The other show monitored (The Other Angle) was run solely by the host Nabil Jassim as a kind of one-man-monologue. Jassim is a famous journalist in Iraq targeting all parties and their campaigns equally. He is sometimes critical, sometimes harsh but also comedic, and he talked about how parties appeal to the basest instincts of voters by the use of national kitsch, emotional songs and the issue of martyrs (those who died fighting the IS group). He gave a long speech on geopolitical relationships in the Middle East and on how the US forces engage in the fight against the IS group in Iraq and Syria. He also talked about Iran, the Iran nuclear deal, US President Donald Trump, Saudi Arabia, Mike Pompeo and very generally about geopolitical issues in the region that might affect Iraq. He showed no real bias towards any of the lists or coalitions.

Rudaw invited average citizens to exchange views on Kurdish parties in each episode of all shows monitored. The citizens engaged in open and controversial discussion about the performance and integrity of different Kurdish parties. In these discussions all parties were equally, sometimes harshly, attacked by the speakers. Apart from that, Rudaw invited an equal number of candidates from KDP (2) and PUK (2). However, Rudaw did not hide its support for the KDP and Prime Minister of Kurdistan Nechirvan Barzani who owns the TV channel. In one episode of the talk show Matha Tafaloun (What are you doing?), while introducing the talk show guest PUK candidate Hawir Jabbara, the moderator said “the candidates of the PUK are knocking on doors and roaming streets to get votes and revive the PUK.” However, during the show Hawir Jabbara was exposed to fierce PUK-criticism by voters.

4.2.3

Decline of sectarian politics as unifying frame across channels and parties

In a related discourse, speakers talked about the changed nature of Iraqi society and how politics are not as sectarian as they used to be. Speakers argued that the party landscape in the election does not follow ethno-sectarian patterns because the Iraqi people are fed up with clientelism and sectarianism. This lens was equally strong on minor and major channels, and appears to be a perception shared by all candidates across all channels and coalitions.

On Al Sharqiya, Abbas al-Yasiri, a candidate for the Victory alliance, said that, “the best thing in these elections is that we don’t see big blocs representing the Sunnis, the Shiites or the Kurds”. He pointed out that: “The political scene in the past was based on sectarian politics.”

Speakers largely assumed that people would vote for qualified politicians rather than for representatives of their ethno-sectarian communities. “The ball is now in the court of the people and it is they who are going to bring about change,” Salah Tayeh Al Mafriji, a candidate for the Baghdad alliance, said on Dija.

Voter participation and their dismissal of sectarian politics were stressed as pivotal. “We cannot change the situation, get out of corruption and remove corrupt persons and thieves if people do not participate in the

elections,” said Zeina Jalal al-Halbusi, of the Iraqi Decision coalition, on Fallujah TV. She also stressed that, “people must replace the faces that currently control the political process, and choose new candidates who aim to satisfy the interests of the nation.”

Loyalty to the party versus loyalty to the state was another recurring motif that also implies a change in political culture. One good example was found on Al Ahad where Kurdish politician Alaa Talabani says that she wanted to be a candidate for all parties, not only for Kurdish parties just because she is Kurdish. In fact she ran for office as a candidate for the Sunni-backed Baghdad alliance. She was critical of the Kurdish parties for clientelism and illogical strategies, saying: “These parties created the Kurdish entrenchment which brought harm to the people and only benefited Kurdish parties competing in the elections.”

In that same vein, Asaad al-Lami, a researcher and academic from Najaf, on behalf of the religious authorities in Najaf, demanded that: “The work of a parliamentary MP should be for the whole country and he should not favour a certain province or party”.

In the talk show, *The Electoral Landscape* (on Al Iraqiya), al-Lami presented himself as an analyst of Ali al-Sistani’s words. In his view, the religious authority cares about the progress of reform and democracy and condemns all obstacles that stand in the way of that. In this regard, sectarian politics is clearly mentioned as one condition hindering progress (alongside authoritarian rule and lack of education). Likewise, his dialogue partner, Yassir Tarbouli, a researcher in Islamic politics, called on the people to distance themselves from sectarianism.

Mathhar al-Janabi, a candidate for the Baghdad alliance, said on Dijla that he had chosen the Baghdad alliance because “this alliance is a trans-sectarianism one and it is distant from quotas and corrupt persons.”

On the Sunni-backed channel, Dijla, Yassin al-Ithawi (of the Iraqi Decision coalition) said that, “we must convince citizens to participate in elections to change the current reality and choose parties that implement their programs accurately.”

The dismissal of ethno-sectarian politics and the need to finally abandon this political culture is one of the strongest frames in the dataset, reiterated on all channels and across ethno-sectarian boundaries.

4.2.4

Other topics: Technicalities of the election, party

alliances and foreign relations

Another frequent topic was the election process and possible factors that could cause disruptions and damage its legitimacy. Speakers mostly demonstrated confidence that elections would run smoothly and that this would allow a legitimate government to take shape.

The newly introduced electronic voting system was widely welcomed and trusted. Likewise trust in the Independent High Electoral Commission, or IHEC, seemed high among the speakers. Huda Sajad (of the Victory alliance on Al Ahad) believed that the electronic counting of votes would protect the elections from interventions and fraud. She quoted IHEC, confirming that results would be announced after 48 hours. Hassan Shwairid, a prominent member of the National coalition, was confident that the electoral process would go smoothly.

However, the speakers were also aware of risks. Aras Habib, a candidate for the Victory alliance, elaborated on a variety of possible disruptions: breakdown of the electronic voting system, interference by foreign forces, accountability for external voting. These possible problems were mentioned on other talk shows as well, for instance, by Ahmed Kanani (candidate of the Fatah alliance). However, despite the risks, speakers generally thought any obstacles could be overcome and that the process would be mostly fair and secure.

In contrast to mainstream opinions, Raad al-Dalaki (of the Wataniya coalition) stated that elections would be severely jeopardized by violence, particularly in the northern provinces, where candidates as well as voters are being threatened by parties and their armed allies. On Al Sharqiya, he said that elections cannot be considered free and fair in the absence of the rule of law and state control of security. However, this was an exceptional statement.

Political Alliances

The fragmentation of the party landscape is a recurring issue assessed differently by the speakers. Some say that fragmentation should be welcomed as an anti-sectarian development that helps voters to judge candidates upon their skills and merits rather than their ethno-sectarian grouping. Others say fragmentation will lead to equal distribution of votes among all lists and alliances, which will subsequently make the formation of a government difficult after elections.

The question of coalitions to be negotiated after elections between the winning parties was also a recurring topic. Many speakers predicted that coalitions would be based on power negotiations, rather than political connection or commonalities.

Talking about the Sairoun alliance on Al Sharqiya, Thafer al-Ani, a candidate for the Iraqi Decision coalition, openly wondered about what kind of electoral programme would bring together a conservative, right-wing religious bloc and the Communist party. He also wondered how the Islamic Party and the Dawa Party formed one list in Anbar and said that the only common ground between them is an interest in power. He also worried about the fragmentation of the party landscape and the many divisions he fears will harm the election process because votes are being wasted, and in the end the winner of elections will start the new legislative term on a weak base instead of a strong one. His dialogue partner on the show, Abbas al-Yasiri, a candidate for the Victory alliance, countered that: "Divisions of blocs is a glimmer of hope to reform the political process." He stressed that the political blocs al-Ani was talking about have similar electoral programmes and they are going to unite in a way that satisfies all winning parties, and would lead to the formation of the largest bloc in parliament.

Nouri al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi both spoke in depth about potential alliances on Al Sharqiya. They both said that potential coalitions had yet to take shape, and that partnerships would only be temporary and subject to change. Al-Maliki argued for the model of a majority government, as opposed to the quota system, and said in politics anything is possible and that MPs needed to put country before party when it came to cooperation. Serving his reputation as "technocrat," al-Abadi said that government formation would require the cooperation of blocs. He stated directly, "I am not ready to join a quota-based government."

Both competitors talked openly about the rift in their own Dawa party, the conflict between the wings, its origin and why these camps would not merge at the time of the interview nor after the elections. This was one of the rare cases of open rivalry in the elections between two candidates.

Topics on the margin

One recurring but relatively weak topic was Iraq's foreign relations with neighbouring countries and the US. Al Sumaria stood out in this regard because of the

moderator Nabil Jassim, who gave a long speech about it on his show.

Also in the two interviews on Al Sharqiya, al-Abadi and al-Maliki both talked extensively about foreign relations. Al-Maliki clearly supported the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria. He warned that the fall of the al-Assad government would mean the fall of Baghdad, triggering regional imbalances. He spun a complicated tale about the delayed delivery of fighter planes from the US that he says would implicate the US in the rise of the IS group. All of this directly relates to his alliance with the Shia militias, who are closely associated with Iran and who have spread similar rumours about the US. Al-Abadi is comparably polite about foreign forces, but he also made clear that in his view the intervention of Turkey in Iraq is based on fear of Kurdish separation and that he will not allow the US to push Iraq in any certain direction.

Also, speakers on many other channels emphasized the importance of good relations with neighbouring countries in the region and that their alliances would work towards improving those relations.¹⁵

In a few cases, the concerns of specific provinces were raised. On Dijla, the fate of Anbar province, its role in the fight against terrorism and the neglect of the region by the current government was stressed, particularly by candidates of the Anbar Is Our Identity coalition. In an extensive individual interview Mohammed al-Karbouli elaborates on the different phases that Anbar went through since 2003, during its struggle against Al Qaeda and the IS group. Wasfi al-Assi, a candidate for the Bab al-Arab list in Kirkuk, lamented the neglect of Kirkuk and explicitly addressed its people in his statement on Al Iraqiya.

Another recurring topic is the question whether candidates suspected of terrorism should be allowed to participate in elections. This issue is the subject of a dispute between Wael Abdul Latif, a candidate for the State of Law coalition and Mounir Haddad (of the Victory alliance) and Ahmad al-Asadi, a candidate for the Conquest coalition (see chapter 4.1.6 for details).

Al-Maliki spent much of his time defending himself. In various ways, he denied responsibility for the failure of national security that allowed the IS group to take control of parts of the country. He blamed a military conspiracy, the civil war in Syria, foreign interests (the US in particular) and al-Abadi for the security crisis. He

¹⁵For instance Aqeel al-Moussawi, a Candidate of the Victory Alliance in Basra on al-Iraqiya as well as Aras Habib, Secretary General of the Iraqi National Congress, and a candidate of the Victory Alliance.

24 attacked the Sunni anti-government protests that started in 2012, implicating them in the conspiracy that he says started the security crisis in 2014. His explanations are mainly related to the past and how he sees conditions, causes and explanations for what happened during his time as PM.

4.2.5 Party promotion rarely occurred

All candidates essentially promised to fight corruption when elected, while none of them explained how corruption could be eliminated or at least decreased. None of the speakers presented a party program or specific political goals for the party. While Iraq has a devastating track record in provision of public services, none of the candidates tackled that issue or answered how services could be improved after elections. The moderators/interviewers did not raise that question either.

In fact, candidates rarely promoted their coalition or any political agenda related to their party or list. Most candidates preferred to analyse the development of the party landscape, the significance of the elections, the nature of ethno-sectarian politics and the failure of past governments. When asked about their motivation to join a specific list or alliance, candidates, regardless of their affiliations, said that the cross-sectarian nature or the fairness of the alliance was their reason for joining. Candidates talked like analysts rather than representatives of a certain political strand. Consequently, competing parties and their policies were not attacked nor criticized. The only party that was openly promoted by their representatives was the Sairoun list. On Al Rasheed and Al Iraqiya candidates repeatedly highlighted the high and growing number of their followers as demonstrated by public gatherings and extraordinary pre-election meetings. Also, candidates of PUK and KDP promoted their parties on Rudaw.

Some of the candidates presented individual projects that were mostly related to their professions. For instance Salah Tayeh al-Mafraji, a candidate for the Baghdad alliance and spokesman for Iraqi Airways, explained on Dijla, that one priority of his work was to develop a program for the aviation sector which would serve transport in general. "If we manage the airline with a national sense of responsibility and isolate it from

external and internal structures we will be able to revive it and make it thrive in the same way it thrived in the 1970's and 1980's when there was no competitors," he said.

Sometimes fuzzy visions were presented such as "focus on education" (Tayeh al-Mafraji) or "better protection of the country's air and sea borders" (Mathhar al-Janabi, candidate for the Baghdad alliance). On Al Iraqiya, Aref Jaber, a candidate for the Democratic Civil coalition in Baghdad, elaborated on his plan to rebuild and strengthen military institutions in order to bolster security and develop the economy. He says he would work on the restructuring of the armed forces because, "if they don't take their rightful place in the society, they will become a burden to the state", and added that, "we will work to limit weapons to the state because we want citizens to feel that weapons are only in the hands of the state and outlawed groups do not have them." Although Jaber is exceptionally clear about his vision of a strong security apparatus in Iraq, it remains an individual passion and is not part of the official party program.

Candidates' decisions to join a specific list appeared arbitrary at times. Fayrouz Hatem, representing the Victory alliance, praised the Sairoun alliance for fielding only new candidates. Yassin al-Ithawi, candidate for the Iraqi Decision coalition, openly talked about the fragmentation within his own coalition and the doubts he himself has on some of the member parties. He even promoted the Anbar Is Our Identity coalition, highlighting its popularity.

4.2.6 Low level of Contestation

Among the talk shows monitored, analysts rarely found contentious debates between election candidates. Most channels avoided any form of contestation. In fact, the majority of talk shows were conducted as political interviews with one candidate only. Al Sumaria never invited more than one guest to the talk shows monitored and there is a long list of shows that were designed to examine the agenda of only one party/one candidate: The show Murashahoun on Fallujah TV, Bil-Harf al-Wahed (As Said) on Al Sharqiya, Al Munawara (The Manoeuvre) on Dijla and Hiwar Bagdad on NRT, The Road to Parliament (Al Iraqiya) and The News Bulletin (Nashret Akhbar) on Al Sumaria. In cases such as Bil-Harf al-Wahed and al-Munawara the host took on the role of an opponent,

challenging the guest with critical and well-informed questions. In that case the level of deliberation significantly increased, analysts say.

Another way of circumventing direct exchange between competing candidates was to invite only guests representing similar camps and positions. In the two episodes of *The Last Scene* (Al-Mashhad al-Akheer) on Al Rasheed for instance, only candidates from the Sairoun alliance were invited. In one episode of *The People's Dome on Dijla*, two candidates of the Baghdad list presented their party without any other guest challenging their statements. About half of the guests invited to the talk shows on Fallujah TV belong to the party started by the channel's owner, Khamis Khanjar (see also chapter 4.1.1).

Analysts observed that the level of political difference between the candidates had an impact on the quality of the debate. The Al Rasheed talk show hosting only candidates from the Sairoun alliance was nothing but hollow campaigning with very little substance regarding political positions or agenda. The debate on *The People's Dome* (Dijla) with candidates solely invited from the Baghdad list was of equally low quality.

Cases of actual contestation on politically relevant issues were identified on the channels Al Sharqiya and Al Ahad. Here, competitors defended their opposing viewpoints with arguments.

On Al Ahad, one of two episodes of the talk show, *Bitawqeet al-Asima* (Time of the Capital), was openly controversial about the question as to whether candidates suspected of collaboration with the IS group should be allowed to participate in elections. Wael Abdul Latif, a former judge and candidate for the State of Law coalition and Mounir Haddad (of the Victory alliance) said that Sunni citizens under suspicion should be allowed to participate as long as no arrest warrant is pending. Ahmad al-Asadi, a candidate for the Conquest alliance, took a more radical stance against the alleged perpetrators, saying that he would under no circumstances collaborate with anyone accused of supporting terrorism. In this show al-Latif and Haddad lined up against al-Asadi.

In the first episode of Studio 18 on Al Sharqiya the security situation was discussed in regard to the feasibility of elections. The candidate from the Wataniya coalition and the candidate from the Victory alliance had opposing views: Raad al-Dalaki (of the Wataniya coalition) was of the opinion that elections were severely jeopardized by violence, particularly in the northern

provinces, where candidates as well as voters were being threatened by parties and their armed allies. He said elections could not be conducted in the absence of the rule of law and state security. His opponent in this debate, Yusuf al-Kalabi (of the Victory alliance) believed the security forces were strong and capable, and that elections could take place. He accused al-Dalaki of using the security argument to disguise his foreseeable failure in the elections.

In the second episode of Studio 18 on Al Sharqiya, the candidates elaborated on their differing assessments of the al-Abadi administration. As the spokesperson of the Victory alliance (to which al-Abadi belongs), Hussein al-Adli highlighted achievements of the al-Abadi administration - such as ending the security crisis, the maintenance of the state and fostering anti-sectarian politics. Meanwhile Izzeddin al-Dawla, representing the Sunni-backed Wataniya alliance, criticized clientelism and power concentration in the cabinet. Another disagreement on this show came between Thafar al-Ani (of the Iraqi Decision coalition) and Abbas Yasiri, a candidate for the Victory alliance. Al-Ani said that coalitions were being formed dependent on how they could best gain power, regardless of actual political positions or platforms. He additionally stated that the fragmentation of the party landscape would undermine the legitimacy of the new government, due to a weak voter base. Yasiri replied that fragmentation mirrors anti-sectarian politics and is a cure for ethno-sectarianism. Coalitions would be able to form efficient alliances after elections, according to political fit, he suggested.

The analysis of the two episodes of Studio 18 indicate that Al Sharqiya tried to encourage contentious debate. Against the backdrop of this observation, the political interviews with al-Abadi and al-Maliki in the show *Bil-Harf al-Wahed* appeared in a different light. In some ways, putting these two episodes together made for a debate at the highest level of Shia politics. Some of the things al-Maliki said (and in particular, things that made al-Abadi look bad) were later put to al-Abadi by the host of the show, and al-Abadi then gave his version of events. It's something of a debate in two halves between the two most important Shia leaders, who are associated but also fierce political opponents. Designing the shows this way provided a contrast, even though two shows were broadcasted separately and the candidates do not talk directly with one another.

Despite these exceptions, it can be stated that contentious debate was mostly avoided by Iraqi TV

channels. Iraqi TV clearly preferred one-on-one interviews, or a group of guests that share the same affiliations. Accordingly, the Iraqi voter rarely found an opportunity to see candidates defending their political agendas against an antagonist or fighting for their party with arguments.

One reason for this reluctance might be fear of sparking political tension when engaging in debate in public. Another reason most probably lies in the proximity between parties and TV channels as previously described (see chapter 2). However, the example of Al Sharqiya also demonstrates that highly popular channels with audiences in both ethno-sectarian camps can engage in classical political contestation too. The quality of debate improves thanks to the pressure of political competition, analysts say.

On Rudaw controversial debate was delegated to the voters that carried out conflicts on behalf of candidates. Voters fiercely defended the performance of "their" party against accusations of other voters. Among the topics debated was the lack of loyalty among Kurdish parties and the neglect of Sulimaniya by the regional government. Voters complained that party competition is not happening neither in Erbil nor in Sulimaniya. Instead the power of the ruling parties seems irrefutable. Voters accused the respective other Kurdish parties to prevent any form of competition in their region.

4.2.7

Friendly language and moderate criticism

Candidates generally talked fairly and considerately about their political competitors in public. Criticism of specific individuals was mostly articulated in a prudent and almost friendly way. Speakers tended to say positive things before criticising someone else.

For instance, in one show on Dijla, Mohammed al-Karbouli (Anbar Is Our Identity) cited himself telling Haider al-Abadi that he loves him as a person, but that he would like him to leave the post of prime minister. This distinction between the politician and the person is a recurring pattern in the way speakers criticised one another.

On Al Ahad, Wael Abdul-Latif, a candidate for the State of Law coalition, was asked about the reason he joined Nouri al-Maliki's list even though he openly criticizes him. Abdul-Latif answered by saying that he criticized the policies pursued by al-Maliki during his rule, but he did

not criticize him as a person. If he had criticized al-Maliki as a person, he wouldn't have been able to run for the elections with the State of Law coalition.

In the show, The People's Dome on Dijla, all candidates were asked to openly comment on politicians - mainly competitors belonging to other parties - that the presenter named for them. Even in the face of this open opportunity to dismiss competitors, the candidates chose words carefully and mostly answered diplomatically, combining criticism with some acknowledgement for achievements the other person might have.¹⁶

Of course there are still exceptions to this but these were very few. For instance, Mathhar al-Janabi, a candidate for the Baghdad alliance, was very outspoken and critical towards other politicians particularly Iyad Allawi and al-Maliki about whom he said: "We lived in terror during the Nouri al-Maliki's government I was targeted and received many threats, the latest was banning me from entering Baghdad." On Rudaw the citizens invited to join the discussion sometimes used harsh language to attack politicians. But in general, cases of aggressive language targeting individuals were rare.

According to analysts the widespread friendly language is a new phenomenon in these elections. It is rooted in the sense of national unity that emerged from the fight against the IS group and the fall of the extremist IS group in northern Iraq.

The tone of criticism changes radically when directed towards larger groups of people such as "sitting parliamentarians" or towards entities such as foreign states or the former government. In fact, any reluctance to criticise ends when it comes to the performance of former governments and the integrity of the political elites. Ever since the fatwa by al-Sistani on "not to test what has been tested", a complete dismissal of the political elites and disgust for their immorality seems to have become commonplace.

In this realm, offensive language is ubiquitous (see chapter 4.1.1) : "corrupt", "dirty", "immoral", "selfish" are

¹⁶Mustafa al-Irsan on Rafae al-Issawi: He won peoples' trust and people sympathized with him. He reached advanced positions in leading the Ministry of Finance, but his approach caused him many problems. Yassin al-Ithawi on Nouri al-Maliki: He ruled Iraq and he had a historic opportunity to build Iraq in the two sessions he ruled, but unfortunately he did not succeed.

Saleh Tayeh on Kathem Finjan al-Hamami, Minister of Transport after the reforms: He was not able to improve the work of the ministry because of external interventions and pressures from other parties who had roles in the ministry and if he had liberated himself from these pressures, he would have done a creative job.)

only a few among many derogatory adjectives frequently applied to the ruling class without naming any specific person.

Criticism can also be very harsh when it comes to the interference of foreign countries in Iraqi affairs or the behaviour of foreign countries in general. Journalist Najim Rubaie, a candidate of Bayariq al-Khair alliance said many hateful things about foreign forces and their "agents" in the Iraqi government on Fallujah TV. He said that "the political class that ruled Iraq is one of the most successful classes because it played the role of agents and destroyed the country as was expected and required from [by foreign forces]." He added that "the political forces want to break up the last stronghold and one of the focal points of citizens, namely the religious authority.... If they could kill him, they would have done it."

Ethno-sectarian racism seems to have dissolved out of most of the discourse. Al-Maliki was the only speaker in the dataset to overtly express his dislike of Sunni Iraqis. In a long interview on Al Sharqiya he states that "the Sunni demonstrations and sit-ins are just a prelude to the fall of Baghdad after the fall of Syria". He goes on by saying that major countries, their political partners, tribal rebels, the Baath Party and the associated Naqshbandi, were united under a foreign will to punish him in retaliation for what happened to Saddam Hussein.¹⁷ According to analysts, al-Maliki's selection of terms verged on racism and conspiracy theory.

¹⁷Nouri al Maliki signed the decree on Saddam Hussein's execution in 2006. His son was married on the same day of that execution.

The success of democratic elections relies on vibrant local media that engage in critical debate and thorough coverage. In an ideal world, media provide information to the general public about all parties and their candidates in a fair and balanced manner; they enable critical assessment of party programs by journalists and facilitate debate between representatives of opposing parties. Ideally, media outlets take a healthy distance from all parties and media coverage is unbiased. Ultimately, the legitimacy of election results depends on the performance of media in fulfilling these obligations before, after, and during elections.

In reality, however, the ideal of an independent and unbiased media is rarely met— whether in Europe, Middle East or the rest of the world. Media usually sympathizes with specific parties and often outlets try to influence public opinion in favour of this or that political stream. This report helps to understand how media got involved in Iraqi politics during elections in 2018, and how strategies and practices differed in this regard on the local channels monitored.

5.1 Criticism and civility rule the show

As demonstrated in chapter 4.1.1 criticism of corrupt elites was central to the debate. Particularly among the smaller channels, Iraqi media today feel free to criticize the ruling elites. While blaming politicians appeared hollow and vague at times, the ubiquity of government criticism indicates a high level of press freedom or a low level of state intervention. The government under former-prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, tried to silence critical voices with legal and extra-legal means (see chapter 2). Government-critical channels such as Al Sharqiya and Al Jazeera were banned in Iraq and had to migrate their offices to neighbouring countries. Journalists working for Al Sharqiya were often excluded from press conferences and other Sunni-backed channels experienced state repression for many years. Despite these fruitless efforts, critical voices have flourished and critical media outlets seem to have survived authoritarian efforts to make them disappear.

The same is true for pluralism. Despite the very low level of internal pluralism that was discussed in chapter

4.1.1, it is safe to say that the media environment is externally very pluralistic, offering opportunities for all strands of society and all camps of the political landscape to present their views. Reviewing the 53 speakers that were invited to the talk shows in the sample, it is obvious that no relevant party was excluded from the public view and that the scope of representation mostly corresponded with the significance of the party.¹⁸ Candidates of 13 different alliances (out of 87) made their way onto the talk shows monitored in the last week before election, with each party gaining at least 3 or more seats in the council of representatives.

Further, analysts noticed an obvious effort of the larger nationwide channels Al Sharqiya, Al Iraqiya and Al Sumaria to resist party favouritism. From the analysis of media structures in Iraq just after 2003, it was clear that all three channels had affiliations and tendencies toward one party or another - but the findings of this study suggest that these channels (at least partly) strive to overcome bias. While Al Iraqiya openly promoted the governing party and sitting prime minister in previous elections, during the project's time window in May 2018 the channel refrained from the reproduction of that pattern by inviting mostly experts to their talk shows. A researcher at the American University in Sulimaniya and one of the experts interviewed in December 2018 in Erbil, highlights the complexity of political conflict rumbling inside the IMN as driving force for this change in content. All political camps that exist in the parliament have some kind of representation inside the IMN, he says. And all departments inside the network are linked to different parties. That, in his view, is the main reason for an ever increasing balance in the talk shows: "they cannot promote any party because there would be always someone to object that promotion".

Other experts that were interviewed by the author took the view that change towards improved balance and inclusive coverage on al-Iraqiya is caused by al-Abadi's reluctance to use the public service broadcaster as his personal mouthpiece. Al-Abadi wants to differentiate himself from Nouri al-Maliki who has always tried to strengthen government control over al-Iraqiya throughout the time of his tenure. "Al-Abadi did not impose himself on al-Iraqiya as much as al-Maliki did. He wanted to make a difference to this kind of policy. Inside the Media network the fight between Maliki and Abadi is still ongoing" says one of the senior journalists interviewed in December 2018.

In that same vein, the new director of the Iraqi Media Network Abdul Munaam al-Assam, introduced by al-Abadi some two years ago, is seen as someone striving for change inside al-Iraqiya by one of the experts interviewed. The new policy is particularly "more inclusive for Sunnis" he says.

However, another interviewee also mentions, that in the news of al-Iraqiya, the first three slots are still dedicated to the activities of the prime minister. Apparently government's self-restraint has its limits.

The big media outlets also try to adapt because of the growing disapproval of sectarianism among Iraqi citizenry: "people now hate sectarian speech and they will hate the politicians that still stick to sectarianism and sectarian language" says one expert interviewed. In this picture, it is the politicians trying to keep up with civic progress among their voters. According to the interviewee, criticism about TV-programs and about how politicians presented themselves in the media are debated in a broad range of social media channels by the viewers. Political parties monitor these online debates and they inform their respective leaders about how the party presence in the mainstream media is perceived among viewers.

According to another senior journalist interviewed it is the anti-sectarian message of the civic movement that has changed the political culture in the country and consequently the style of political debating in the media.¹⁹ He also regards the interventions of Ali al-Sistani as another root cause for change. By asking the people to vote for "new faces" Sistani withdrew his support for a government dominated by Shia parties (that have failed to serve the country in the past) and thus paved the way for anti-sectarian alliances and debates.

Finally, this study found that candidates talked fairly and considerately about their political competitors in public. The dismissal of ethno-sectarian politics and the need to finally abandon this political culture is one of the strongest frames in the dataset, reiterated on all channels and across ethno-sectarian boundaries. Ethno-sectarian discrimination was found only once when Nouri al-Maliki talked about the Sunni protest movement in a

¹⁸This is a qualitative study that cannot make relevant statements about quantities of representation. Therefore the remark on inclusion/exclusion can only be anecdotal.

¹⁹This civic movement started in Basra some years ago and soon sparked protests in all parts of the country. In the beginning, the movement mostly condemned corruption and the lack of public services. Later sectarian politics and nepotism was recognized as root causes of Iraqi problems by the protesters.

30 derogatory way. Against the backdrop of a rise in ethnic racism in Iraqi (mainly Arab) media during the referendum on Kurdish independence at the end of 2017, this observation is indicating major progress towards civility in public debates. Some say the new tone indicates the beginning of an anti-sectarian era in Iraq rooted in a national pride about resolving the security crisis sparked by the Islamic State: “Daesh is the only enemy we have and it is a common enemy for all channels and all politicians alike” says one of the senior journalists interviewed, who regards the rise and the fall of the Islamic State in Iraq as a driving force for national cohesion.

However, it would be naïve to believe in a complete disappearance of ethno-sectarian racism. In fact, according to some of the experts interviewed, social media is now becoming a major site of fierce fighting between ethno-sectarian camps and racism of all kinds. Future research should be dedicated to the question how old and new media compare in their relation to these trends.

5.2 Elections in the absence of political programs

Bias and political parallelism is certainly a weak spot in the overall performance of Iraqi media. Pronounced bias was found among the smaller channels that targeted local audiences and ethno-sectarian communities, such as Fallujah, al Ahad, Rasheed and Dijla. This has obvious potential to harm the electoral process because locals that watch these channels will never be confronted with challenging views. In this case the echo chamber does not allow for competing views to be considered or questioned by voters. However, the impact of media bias on the democratic process might also be mitigated by the overall strong level of media literacy among media users as found in a recent MiCT research.²⁰

That research demonstrated that media users not only recognize the differences in reporting and bias, but that they even offset the deficits of a polarized-pluralistic media structure to some degree by adjusting their user behaviour, for instance by combining and comparing different channels. Seventy-five percent of respondents in

that quantitative study say that they regularly use two, three or more sources to obtain information about Iraqi domestic politics, while almost 60 percent say they regularly compare news from stations representing different political constituencies.²¹

The relative absence of contestation is another problem found by the study at hand. Only very few channels engage in controversial debates about politically relevant issues. TV channels generally prefer a one-to-one-interview model with candidates, or a set of speakers that belong to the same political camp. Accordingly, Iraqi voters rarely had opportunity to see two candidates defend their political agenda against one another unless a candidate was interrogated by a skilled moderator that took the role of an opponent. The latter was found only in two shows (Al Sharkiya and on Dijla). Interestingly, the experts interviewed were all very critical about Al-Sharkiya’s debating style, particularly about provocative language and confrontational questions applied in the interviews. According to experts, people like to watch heated debate on al-Sharkiya because they think it is more directly related to the real problems of Iraq, not hiding behind friendly words. The channel is thus filling a gap that is left by al-Iraqiya’s reluctance to touch upon any delicate matter. Experts recognized that Al Sharkiya stopped advocating for the Sunni community – some said that this was a decision made in Saudi Arabia. However, during the election campaigns, al-Sharkiya engaged in Inner-Sunni conflicts by fiercely fighting the powerful Halboussi family, a Sunni clan that is allied with the Karbouli family in Niniveh both of which are exploiting economic opportunities in the region. Karbouli-owned TV channel Dijla defended the interests of the family leading to a situation where two channels engaged in a public battle regarding the role and status of these clans in Niniveh. Apparently, Al Sharkiya has abandoned ethno-sectarian advocacy but remains a strong and partisan player when it comes to political conflict.

The relative absence of contestation is related to the draught of detailed party programs. While the topic of corruption took centre stage mostly on the smaller channels, no substantial solution was presented by any of the candidates. This was surprising since the significance of the topic and its strong resonance amongst the people of Iraq would suggest that the presentation of a

²⁰Fiedler, Anke / Wollenberg, Anja (2017): Critical Thinking meets Selective Exposure. An examination of the media literacy of Iraqi media users. MiCT studies (2017/2)

²¹Ibid. p. 19-18

convincing solution to the problem of corruption would pave the way to election success. But this was not the case. Even the victorious Sairoun coalition presented nothing but hollow slogans on that matter. As discussed in chapter 4.1.5 none of the candidates presented a detailed political program. Besides some personal projects, speakers did not promote a political vision or any tangible goals that his/her alliance stood for. Except for the candidates of the Sairoun coalition, speakers did not even try to promote their party. Instead, candidates behaved like experts analysing recent changes in the political culture and the character of the party landscape.

This begs the question: How can voters make up their minds if parties do not offer significant distinguishing features or policies? According to the study, it can be assumed that the quality "new faces" was the only tangible asset and differentiator introduced by the winning party, Sairoun. New faces - that was the promise - will solve Iraq's problems with corruption. That is a somewhat worrying observation because local history tells us that new faces will simply adapt to the system, rather than changing it. Despite the euphoria that was sparked by some unexpected election results, all evidence suggests that corrupt practices inside the political system will survive a change of personnel. It is particularly concerning that journalists and moderators did not exert any pressure on the candidates about this. Only few moderators were well prepared and managed to control the course of the conversation. Almost none of them urged the candidates to present a political program or tangible solutions to the most pressing problems of the country.

5.3 Suggestions for media assistance deriving from the study

Based on the findings of the study, MiCT drew some conclusions on how to improve media assistance in Iraq. We suggest the following starting points:

- International Media Assistance Organisations (IMAO) could offer expert support to TV channels on how to create and conceptualize interesting TV debates and how to moderate a controversial debate. Iraqi moderators could for instance be mentored by European colleagues such as Zeinab Badawi (hard talk) or Günther Jauch. They could be allowed to shadow the European hosts for an episode of their talk show, watch how they prepare for a debate or interview. It would also be important to bring producers into this too, as producers are often the ones doing the preparation of talking points / questions for the moderator.
- In parallel, it would be useful to set up a research project that investigates the reason behind the very obvious avoidance of controversial debates among Iraqi media outlets. The research could be used to spark interest in the matter within democratic institutions and the media alike.
- Against the backdrop of the observations made in the study it would be helpful to invest in research on viewers attitudes towards different aspects of TV debates such as contestation, deliberation, dispute and racism. Research should investigate the assessment of the viewers and the results could be discussed with producers and editors of TV channels.
- International MAO could introduce training programs on investigative journalism that would enable Iraqi journalists to overcome the vague and aimless lament on corruption and replace that with tangible case investigations. Capacity building should be framed by measures aiming to protect journalists from harassment and other harm when reporting about corruption. The elections might have created a climate that will allow investigative journalism to progress in Iraq. This is a window of opportunity not to be missed by international organisations.
- IMAO could help Iraqi TV channels to come up with new and interesting formats for talk shows that facilitate more debate and political differentiation such as town hall talk shows/debates, where voters get to ask the questions, or like the presidential debates in the US, where two top-polling leaders meet and discuss.
- IMAO could take advantage of the current absence of hate speech and seek to encourage the media to sign a charter of ethics against the use of racism and hate speech in the media.

Appendix

List of all TV talk shows of the sample

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Channel	Talk show	Episode
Al Ahad	Bitawqeet al-Asima (Time of the Capital)	May 6 (50 minutes)
	Bitawqeet al-Asima (Time of the Capital)	May 7 (53 minutes)
	Quota	May 6 (54 minutes)
	Quota	May 5 (55 minutes)
Al Sharqiya	Bil-Harf al-Wahed (As Said)	May 8 (48 minutes)
	Bil-Harf al-Wahed (As Said)	May 10 (49 minutes)
	Studio 18	May 4 (78 minutes)
	Studio 18	May 7 (100 minutes)
Al Iraqiya	The Road to Parliament	May 9 (30 minutes)
	The Road to Parliament	May 8 (30 minutes)
	Al-Mashhad al-Siyasi (The Political Landscape)	May 4 (43 minutes)
	Al-Mashhad al-Siyasi (The Political Landscape)	May 5 (48 minutes)
Dijla	Al-Munawara (The Manoeuvre)	May 5 (49 minutes)
	Al-Munawara (The Manoeuvre)	May 10 (47 minutes)
	Qubat al-Shaab (People's Dome)	May 9 (48 minutes)
	Qubat al-Shaab (People's Dome)	May 5 (48 minutes)
Al Sumaria	Nashret Akhbar (News Bulletin)	May 4 (10 minutes)
	Nashret Akhbar (News Bulletin)	May 7 (11 minutes)
	Zawiya Ukhra (Another Angle)	May 3 (42 minutes)
Rudaw	Ten Questions	May 7 (56 minutes)
	Ten Questions	May 6 (45 minutes)
	Matha Tafaloun (What are you doing?)	May 5 (15 minutes)
	Matha Tafaloun (What are you doing?)	May 6 (13 minutes)
Fallujah	Murashahoun (Candidates)	May 7 (30 minutes)
	Murashahoun (Candidates)	May 6 (30 minutes)
	Sijal Intikhabi (Electoral Debate)	May 10 (54 minutes)
	Sijal Intikhabi (Electoral Debate)	May 9 (50 minutes)
Al Rasheed	Al-Mashhad al-Akheer (The Last Scene)	May 10 (28 minutes)
	Al-Mashhad al-Akheer (The Last Scene)	May 9 (42 minutes)

