

US moves to silence Iraq's most popular TV news channel

Mike Head

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In another indication of the “freedom” and “democracy” that Washington is bringing to the people of Iraq, the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) shut down the Baghdad bureau of the country's most watched television news channel on November 24. Without warning, more than 20 police and Interior Ministry officials arrived at the Al Arabiya facility, ordered its closure and seized its broadcasting equipment “until further notice”.

The official pretext for the closure was Al Arabiya's November 16 broadcast of an audiotape purported to carry the voice of ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The tape urged the Iraqi people to wage war against US-led coalition troops and their Iraqi collaborators, calling armed attacks a legitimate and patriotic duty.

Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish politician who currently holds the IGC's rotating presidency, accused Al Arabiya of “inciting murder because it's calling for killings through the voice of Saddam Hussein”. He declared that the network would be banned from working in Iraq for “a certain time”, which he did not specify. Talabani threatened to launch prosecutions under the Coalition Provisional Authority's Order Number 14 on “Prohibited Media Activity”, which provides for jail terms of up to one year, heavy fines and permanent confiscation of premises and property.

Talabani later announced that the IGC had launched a “comprehensive” anti-terror plan, including “military and defensive measures”, and that a nationwide media campaign would be launched next month.

The police action, which the US State Department immediately endorsed, was clearly orchestrated from Washington. It came three days after US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld denounced the Dubai-based channel, together with its main competitor, Al Jazeera, as “violently anti-coalition”.

After the ban was imposed, Rumsfeld stepped up his rhetoric, claiming to have seen “scraps of information” that suggested Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera were collaborating with terrorists. While saying the information was still being investigated, he insinuated that reporters from the two

networks had an uncanny knack for showing up “before and during” attacks on US coalition forces.

Al Arabiya's news editor and journalists strongly protested that their channel was being victimised, pointing out that the audiotape was broadcast from Dubai, not Baghdad, and that other networks had also played the tape. “What we have done is not more than broadcasting what we think is important news,” Al Arabiya news director Salah Negm insisted. “Our job as journalists is not to ignore the existence of Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden or whoever. We can bury our heads in the sand and say, ‘They don't exist.’ But, actually, they do exist. People want to know the news.”

Al-Arabiya's Baghdad bureau chief, Wehad Yacoub, said he and 50 other Iraqi employees were bewildered by the IGC's order to shut down. “It is not fair. We did not break any law. This bureau is part of the company so they are punishing us because our company has broadcast that tape. We are all disappointed and we are now jobless.”

Al Arabiya said it was told that the IGC would reconsider the ban only if it and its employees gave written undertakings not to promote violence. Facing a mounting insurgency, the US-led occupying forces have apparently decided to escalate a long-running series of reprisals and threats against Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera and any other media outlet that does not function as an uncritical mouthpiece of the military occupation.

Since April, US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and other officials have been vitriolic in denouncing both Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera, claiming that simply by reporting the daily attacks on coalition troops and the growing tally of US casualties, they have “spread hatred”, “slanted the news” and “endangered the lives of American troops”.

The attacks on Al Jazeera began in Afghanistan in 2001, where US forces bombed its offices. In April this year, American missiles destroyed its Baghdad offices, killing a senior reporter. During July, its journalists were subjected to strafing, death threats, arrests and the confiscation of material.

In August, US officials attacked as “irresponsible in the extreme” Al Arabiya’s decision to broadcast pictures of masked men who threatened to kill members of the IGC. In September, Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera were barred for two weeks from covering the Governing Council’s media conferences or entering Provisional Coalition Authority ministries.

Al Arabiya was launched nine months ago by the Saudi-controlled satellite TV network MBC, Lebanon’s Hariri Group and other investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf States. It was established to compete directly with the Qatar-based Al Jazeera, which Washington has long sought to silence. Because Al Arabiya has also refused to merely parrot the Bush administration’s line, it has attracted a substantial audience throughout the Middle East and in Iraq itself.

A US State Department poll in seven Iraqi cities in October found that among residents with satellite dishes (an estimated one-third of the population), 37 percent named Al Arabiya as their preferred news source, followed by Al Jazeera (26 percent), with the US-run Iraqi Media Network, now renamed Al Iraqiyah, well behind on 12 percent.

International journalists’ organisations condemned the Al Arabiya closure. Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Robert Ménard said: “Iraq’s new authorities should not try to get a news organisation to change its editorial line by using force—such methods belong to the past and are contrary to the promises of democracy made to the Iraqi people.”

The International Federation of Journalists called it political censorship. IFJ general secretary Aidan White said: “It looks as though Arab media trying to report on the Iraq situation from an objective viewpoint are being targeted because they are broadcasting a message the US does not want to hear. That will not win the peace or the confidence of the Arab community either inside Iraq or in the region.”

The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists said it “raises deep concerns about the future direction of press freedoms in Iraq”.

The anti-democratic regulations used against Al Arabiya—the Coalition Provisional Authority’s Order Number 14—were imposed in June as attacks on coalition forces began to spread. In true Orwellian language, the order spoke of providing “accurate information” to the Iraqi people, cherishing “freedom of speech” and welcoming the emergence of a “free and independent” media in Iraq. It then gave the US Administrator Paul Bremer absolute authority to shut down media outlets that published any material that “incites violence” against the occupying forces, “incites civil disorder” or “advocates the return to power of the Iraqi Baath Party”.

Over the past seven months since the capture of Baghdad, US troops have already shut down the Sawt Baghdad (Voice of Baghdad) radio station, impounded copies of the newspaper Sadda-al-Auma, destroyed the offices of Al Adala newspaper, and ransacked the Baghdad premises of Al Mustaqila newspaper. Numerous journalists have been killed or detained by occupation forces.

The ban on Al Arabiya is part of a wider Washington push to smother all coverage of the growing resistance to its occupation. Questioned by reporters about the ban, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the IGC was trying to work with the news media to “avoid a situation where these media are used as a channel for incitement, for inflammatory statements, and for statements and actions that harm the security of people who live and work in Baghdad, including the Iraqi citizens themselves”.

As he denounced Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera last week, Rumsfeld said he hoped new satellite TV programming being developed by US authorities in Iraq would help offset the “clear hostility” of the main Arabic satellite news channels. The new programming is expected to be up and running within a month, according to the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff. Given the obvious political vetting, however, it is unlikely to boost the ratings of the US Iraqi Media Network.

The media campaign is also aimed at the American public. Last week, the military unveiled a new spokesman for US forces in the country, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, a higher-ranking officer with more media experience than those who have until now been the public face of the occupation.

That followed a redesigning of the podium from which news conferences are held, with two large flat-screen monitors installed to carry PowerPoint presentations the military is using to show off operations and tout successes. A large, deep-blue seal representing the Coalition Provisional Authority hangs prominently behind the podium, with the words “Justice, Freedom, Liberty, Security” written around its border.

But, as the clampdown on Al Arabiya demonstrates, the US-led occupation makes a mockery of these words. It increasingly requires arbitrary police raids, the suppression of press freedom and the silencing of all dissent.



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