



PROJECT ALBATROS II MENA

COUNTERING INFORMATION THREATS IN IRAQ,
EGYPT AND LEBANON

Information environment analysis:

IRAQ

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STUDY OF IRAQ'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Warsaw 2024

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CHAPTER 1. Characteristics of the information environment in Iraq

Although the main Kurdish and Arab (federal) media cover the entire territory of Iraq, the Kurds tend to focus on Kurdish media, while the Arabs concentrate on federal/Arab media. Besides the main media outlets, there are many small TV stations, portals, etc., closely linked to specific political forces. However, most media, both Kurdish and Arab, are highly politicized. While the major ones, such as Rudaw or Kurdistan24, try to maintain the appearance of independence, they are more state-owned than private, representing the interests of the President of the Region, Nechirwan Barzani, and the Prime Minister of the Region, Masrour Barzani, as well as their party – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). There are also independent media, but journalists associated with them face pressure, violence, and arrests (especially in Kurdistan), so they do not have a wide reach. Media linked to opposition groups play an intermediary role, especially NRT TV, affiliated with the New Generation Movement founded by Shaswar Abdulwahid.

The specificity of the Iraqi political scene (characterized by significant fragmentation, ethno-sectarianism, armed groups linked to various parties, and tribalism), as well as the concentration of capital in the upper social strata (and the dependence of their interests on politics, including elections), results in a highly fragmented media landscape. Many media outlets are closely tied to particular groups, which however does not always negatively affect their professionalism, the best example—though not the only one—being Rudaw.

Among television stations, the state-run Iraqiya and the Arabic-language channels Al Sharqiyah, Al Sumaria, as well as the Kurdish-language Rudaw, Kurdistan24, and NRT have the largest reach. Other important Arabic-language stations include Dijlah, Rabiaa, Rasheed, I-news, Awla, Ahad, and Alghadeer, with the last two being linked to Shiite militias. Kurdish-language channels of significance include KNN, Kurdsat, Kurdistan TV, and Sterk TV. According to Al Jazeera, in 2022 there were 57 television channels licensed in Iraq, a number that has since increased. Additionally, there are 60 offices of TV stations broadcasting from outside Iraq and 152 radio stations. In 2021, the websites of several TV stations (Al Kawthar TV, Nabaa, Karbala TV, Afaq TV, An Naeem, Al Alam, Kataib Hezbollah, Al Forat, Al Masirah, Kaf, Al Maloomah, AsiaSatTV) were taken over by the USA.

Due to the globalization of reach enabled by the internet and the widespread use of the Arabic language, Iraqi audiences are not limited to Iraqi media but also have access to numerous pan-Arab media outlets (as well as Arabic versions of global media), especially news portals and television channels. To a lesser extent, this also applies to Kurdish-language media broadcasting from outside Iraq.

1.1. Traditional Media

1.1.1 State-Owned Media

Federal Media

Iraqi public media operate within the government-funded company Iraqi Media Network, whose head in 2024 became Karim Hammadi. Previously, since January 2020, the head was presenter Nabil Jassim. He was appointed to this position during the premiership of Adel Abdel Mahdi, who was associated with pro-Iranian factions, but most of his tenure took place under the government of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, supported by the UAE. Shortly after the government was taken over by the Shiite Coordination Framework, whose core consists of groups linked to Iran, accusations against Jassim emerged and an attempt was made to dismiss him by the Board of Trustees (January 2023). Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani did not recognize these decisions; however, in April 2023, control of the Board of Trustees was taken over by muqawama (Islamic Resistance in Iraq, the most pro-Iranian factions forming the backbone of Sudani's government). The attempt to remove Jassim was also supported by the ultra-conservative Islamist Shiite MP Raed al-Maliki, who is the author of laws criminalizing homosexuality and concerning personal status (more on this later). Ultimately, Jassim was dismissed in March 2024. The Board of Trustees consists of the following members: Awsam Majid Ghanem Hassan al-Mohammedawi (journalist; author of a book about public media as the cornerstone of democracy; linked to Kataib Hezbollah; according to the Washington Institute, he edits KH's platform called Kaf on Telegram), Thaer Hatitah Ibrahim Al-Ghanimi (general director of inews and mowafaq TV, affiliated with Kataib Sajid al-Shuhada and also Qais al-Khazali – Asaib Ahl al-Haq; active on X, where he praises muqawama attacks), Hamad Mahmoud Muhammad Al-Dukhi (writer and poet from Nineveh, academic staff, Sunni), Waelan Abdullah Abdul Rahman Rashid (representative of the Kurdish PUK), and Sanaa Saeed Hadi Karumi (journalist at Holy Quran Radio, associated with Rajan al-Kildani, commander of a pro-Iranian Christian militia close to Kataib Hezbollah).

Iraqi Media Network	
Al Iraqiyah Television (https://imn.iq/)	Several channels, including the general channel (on YouTube – https://www.youtube.com/imngeneral) and the news channel Iraqiyah Akhbariyah – both channels are live streaming; also on YouTube. (https://www.youtube.com/@IraqiaNews) and X (https://x.com/iraqmedianet - 2.1 million followers), as well as Instagram and Telegram and the Kurdish-language channel Iraqiyah Kurdiyah, which also has its own YouTube page (https://www.youtube.com/@IMN_KURDISH) and on Facebook (facebook.com/imn.kurdish); Turkmen-language channel Iraqiyah Turkmeniyah (ina.iq/turkmen); Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbDtmAb7N-5FUyYFVmyfp1A ; Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/1404982096728802) Syriac-language channel Iraqiyah Sirianiyah Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/syriac98/ ; Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/@IMN_SYRIAC).

Radio Al Iraqiyah (imn.iq/الراديو-العراقية)	There is also online streaming as well as a YouTube account and a Facebook account: https://www.facebook.com/iraqiaradio .
IMN Magazine (https://magazine.imn.iq/)	A biweekly magazine-style publication, issued both in traditional (print) form and as a PDF available online, combined with a portal (also magazine-style, i.e., featuring essays and articles on various topics ranging from politics, economy, culture, art, social issues, etc.).
Al Sabah	A daily newspaper, with Ahmed Abdel Hussein as its director. The newspaper also has a website at alsabaah.iq and an online PDF edition; it is present on social media on X. (https://x.com/ALSabaahIQ - 16 thousand followers), Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/alsabaahnewspaper), Telegram and Instagram.
Iraqi News Agency (ina.iq)	Press agency (in addition to Arabic also in Kurdish, Turkmen, and English); present on X (https://x.com/INA_NEWS - 58.5 thousand followers), Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/INAwebsite), Youtube and Instagram.

Kurdistan Regional Government

The ownership structure of the media corporations Rudaw and Kurdistan24 classifies them more as quasi-public media rather than private ones. Although they sometimes demonstrate a certain degree of independence, especially Kurdistan24, they generally pursue an information policy aligned with the interests of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in general, and specifically those of Nechirwan and Masrour Barzani. On the other hand, Rudaw maintains a high level of professionalism and is the most internationally recognized Iraqi media outlet thanks to its very strong English-language service.

Kurdish media	
Rudaw https://www.rudaw.net/	Kurdish-language television, also with live streaming, the largest reach, associated with the PDK (Kurdistan Democratic Party), controlled by President Nechirwan Barzani. The website (https://www.rudaw.net/) is available in 5 language versions (different content in each): Sorani, Kurmanji, Arabic, Turkish, English; there is also Kurdish-language Rudaw radio (also live streaming online). Rudaw is also present on platform X in 5 language versions: Sorani (1.4 million followers); English (423 thousand), Kurmanji (246 thousand), Arabic (209 thousand), and Turkish (183 thousand), as well as on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and Telegram. Furthermore, there is the Rudaw Research Center – an analytical center with its own website in Kurdish, Arabic, and English: https://rudawrc.net/ .
Kurdistan24	The second largest television station in Kurdistan (Kurdish-language, live online streaming), also associated with the PDK but controlled by a rival faction, namely Prime Minister Masrur Barzani – the website is available in 6

https://www.kurdistan24.net/	language versions (Sorani, Kurmanji, Farsi, English, Arabic, Turkish); on platform X in the following language versions: Sorani (242 thousand followers), English (163 thousand), Turkish (94 thousand), Arabic (50 thousand), Kurmanji (40 thousand), and Farsi (7 thousand), as well as on Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube. There is also Kurdistan24 radio (available online, Kurdish-language). Additionally, there is the Rudaw Research Center – an analytical center that has its own website in Kurdish, Arabic, and English: https://rudawrc.net/ .
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1.1.2 Private media

Television and News Services	
Al Sharqiyah https://www.alsharqiya.com/ar	Sunni satellite television broadcasting from Baghdad, one of the most popular in Iraq (but with a bad reputation among pro-Iranian Shiites, who accuse it of sympathizing with the overthrown Saddam Hussein regime). The website (https://www.alsharqiya.com/ar) also has an English version; it has a presence on X (2.8 million followers), Facebook (8.9 million followers), YouTube, and Instagram. The owner is Sunni Saad al Bazzaz, a businessman living in London who previously had ties to the Baath Party; nevertheless, his media outlets are considered objective. It operates two Arabic-language channels broadcasting live online (a general channel and a news channel). Under Saddam, Bazzaz was director of the Iraqi News Agency (https://ina.iq/eng/aboutus.html), director of Iraqi Radio and Television, as well as the official Iraqi newspaper “Al-Jumhuriya,” founded in 1958 (https://saadbazzaz.com/?page_id=5) — in fact, he was the manager of Baathist propaganda. From 1979 to 1984, he was director of the Iraqi Cultural Center in London, which helped facilitate his obtaining UK citizenship. He fled Iraq in 1992 after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, disappointed with the politics and the overall condition of his country. In 1992, he wrote the book <i>The Gulf War and the One After</i>, in which he criticizes the Iraqi authorities. In 2005, <i>The Guardian</i> reported that Saad al-Bazzaz, the “Murdoch of Iraqi media,” was accused in a British court of accepting £2.5 million from the Saudis to launch his popular and widely read newspaper <i>Azzaman / Al-Zaman</i>. The court confirmed these charges — part of the money was used, among other things, to criticize Qatar. In 2007, after Saddam’s execution, Iraqi authorities closed Al-Sharqiya’s Baghdad office on charges of spreading sectarianism. The author of the article writes that, according to some critics, the media outlet is anti-government. Al-Bazzaz himself stated, while in Dubai, that this did not prevent the station from broadcasting. Al-Bazzaz is director of three companies in the United Kingdom: IBC TV Ltd, Sharqiya Ltd, and Azzaman International Ltd.
Al Sumaria https://www.alsumaria.tv	Arabic-language television and website – Arabic only, also Arabic-language radio; both radio and television are available via live online streaming; presence on social media: X (4 million followers), Facebook (5 million), Instagram, YouTube, Telegram; regarded as independent and liberal. The owner is Lebanese Sunni Chafic Elias Tabet (linked to Saudis), chairman of Alsumaria Media Group, connected to the large Lebanese construction company Consolidated Engineering & Trading Co. Some of the earliest archival entries on the Wayback Machine indicate that Al-Sumaria belongs to the offshore company C.E.T. SAL with a capital of 1 million dollars.
Dijlah TV	Arabic-language satellite television broadcasting from Amman, owned by Sunni politician Mohammad al-Karbuli from the Al-Hal party; also radio (both

https://www.dijlah.tv/	TV and radio are in Arabic and available online via live streaming); website in Arabic; present on social media: X (1.2 million followers), Facebook (5.6 million), YouTube, Instagram.
Al Rabiaa https://alrabiaa.tv	Arabic-language satellite television (a network of channels), with a very professional website (https://alrabiaa.tv/), news posted very frequently – Arabic only; also radio (both radio and television available via live online streaming). Presence on social media: YouTube: youtube.com/@alrabiaatv – active, 1.15 million subscribers, 22,000 videos; X: x.com/alrabiaatv – active, 355,100 followers; Facebook: facebook.com/alrabiaatv – active, 2.4 million followers; Telegram: t.me/s/alrabiaatv – active, 22,500 subscribers; TikTok: tiktok.com/@alrabiaatv – active, 1.6 million followers. Founded in 2021 on the initiative of Ghazwan Jassem, a well-known television presenter who is currently the main manager. Jassem previously worked at Al-Sumaria, Al Rasheed, and Asia Network TV, among others. He is a kind of influencer (facebook.com/Ghazwan.Jassem – 152,000 followers; x.com/ghazwanaljassem – 530,000 followers) and also runs a sports channel. In October 2022, the television headquarters was attacked by supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr due to an unspecified report prepared by the channel (https://cpj.org/2022/10/al-rabiaa-tv-headquarters-stormed-by-protesters-in-baghdad/); connections with Iraqi banks: Rafidain and Rasheed; Al-Rabiaa is a network of television channels. In addition to television and its online portal, the Al-Rabiaa network also has a radio network. Its messaging is fairly neutral but obviously anti-Israeli (targeting the so-called “Zionist entity”). The website has a security section where it publishes news about the fight against ISIS, showing a positive attitude towards the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashed al-Shaabi), including the muqawama (resistance groups). The coverage regarding Ukraine and Russia is somewhat biased, emphasizing the power and victory of Russia. There is little information about Poland—mostly general news about the border situation plus sports. In 2023, Al-Rabiaa established a cooperation agreement with Qatar’s beIN, allowing it to broadcast their sports programs.
Al Rasheed https://www.alrasheedmedia.com/	Arabic-language satellite television with branches in several other Arab countries, general profile (not exclusively news), website (https://www.alrasheedmedia.com/) – Arabic only, also radio available in the provinces of Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Anbar, and Kirkuk (both television and radio also accessible via live online streaming); presence on social media: X (38,000 followers), Facebook (6 million), YouTube, Instagram; founded by Saad Asem al-Janabi and his son Asem Saad; affiliated with former Sunni parliament speaker and founder of the Taqadum party, Mohammad al-Halbusi.
Al Ahad https://alahad.iq/	Associated with Asaib Ahl al-Haq, i.e., Qais al-Khazali (part of the pro-Iranian “Axis of Resistance”) – website only in Arabic; present on X (Arabic version – 1,700 followers, Kurdish version – 1,600 followers; English version – 14,000 followers), Telegram, and TikTok; blocked on Facebook; radically anti-Western, anti-Turkish, and pro-Iranian; also hostile toward the Kurdish PDK (but not the rival PUK).
Alghadeer https://alghadeertv.iq/	Arabic-language television associated with the Shiite, pro-Iranian Badr Organization of Hadi al-Ameri; the website is in Arabic. It has a presence on social media, including X (450,000 followers), Facebook (142,000), as well as TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram. The channel is pro-Iranian and anti-Western but more moderate than Al Ahad (https://alghadeertv.iq/).

Al Awla https://alawla.tv/	Arabic-language television also available via live online streaming, with a website in Arabic and English. It has a presence on social media, with 10,000 followers on X; 732,000 on Facebook; on YouTube (youtube.com/@alawlamedia) – active, 87,300 subscribers, 5,200 videos; Telegram (t.me/s/alawlatv) – active, 8,260 subscribers. Founded in 2023, it belongs to Shadow Message Broadcasting Company. The channel's president is Dan Abdo. It is associated with the pro-Iranian Assyrian politician and commander of the Babylon Brigade, Rajan al-Kildani, linked to Shiite militias. The channel claims to be “independent” and “moderate” but is actually strongly pro-Iranian, anti-Israeli, and pro-Palestinian. It frequently cites statements by Khamenei accusing the “Zionist regime” of crimes. At the same time, many statements from Pope Francis are featured, mainly concerning peace. The messaging is relatively moderate in its hatred of the West, aside from subtle references describing the West as a “civilization of death,” which are legitimized by quotations from Pope Francis. Live broadcasts are available on the website. English-language content only appeared on the English site at the end of August last year; before that, the content was exclusively in Arabic on the Arabic site. The English site features more content about Catholics than about Shiites and statements by Khamenei.
Al Etejah https://www.aletejahtv.iq	Television associated with Kataib Hezbollah, website in Arabic; blocked on YouTube, X account not updated for a year (500 followers), Facebook – 9,000 followers; available on the Iranian Aparat.com and on ok.ru.
I-news https://www.i-news.tv/	The satellite news channel broadcasting live online from Baghdad since 2018 is called I News Channel. Its website is quite amateurish and limited in content, available only in Arabic. The channel has an active presence on social media platforms: YouTube (youtube.com/inewschannel1) with 538,000 subscribers and 47,000 videos including live streaming; X (x.com/inewschanneltv) with 15,800 followers; Facebook (facebook.com/INEWSTViq) with 1.3 million followers; Instagram; Telegram (t.me/s/inewschannel_tv) with 13,000 subscribers; and TikTok (tiktok.com/@inewschannel) with 676,100 followers. Key figures include Ahmed al-Sahn, the general manager, and Bilal al-Ani, who manages social media. Editors include Laith Al-Khafaji, Hassanein Alaa, Muhammad Ali, Adel Hamed Al Saray, and Mustafa Rasool. As of October 2, 2024, the international news section is entirely devoted to coverage of “Hezbollah strikes on Zionist targets.” Previous international news also featured a strong anti-Israeli stance. The channel also disseminated a false photo purportedly of a would-be assassin of Donald Trump. Locally, the channel focuses mainly on news related to the actions of the federal government. Despite the amateur and technically imperfect website, live streaming is available. Additionally, the news feed on nabd.com predominantly covers topics related to the “Zionist entity” and similar themes
Al Rafidain https://alrafidain.tv/	Sunni satellite television broadcasting from Istanbul, anti-Western and simultaneously anti-Iranian, with a website in Arabic and live online streaming.

Al Forat https://alforatnews.iq/	Shiite television (also available online live), associated with Ammar al-Hakim, website in Arabic, presence on social media: X (18 thousand), Facebook (6.2 million), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram.
Al Baghdadiyah https://albaghdadiatv.com/	Satellite television broadcasting from Egypt (also available online via live streaming), founded by the Shiite Awn Hussein al-Khashlouk (unaffiliated with militias or religious parties and not pro-Iranian), with two channels; present on X (4 thousand), Facebook (738 thousand), Instagram, and YouTube; website in Arabic; critical of both the USA and Iran as well as the post-2003 order in Iraq.
Samarra TV https://www.samarra.tv/	The Arabic-language satellite channel broadcasting from Erbil belongs to Naqaa Dijlah Radio and Television Broadcasting Services Company. It offers live online streaming and has a website (https://www.samarra.tv/) which is exclusively in Arabic but noted for being content-poor and infrequently updated. The channel maintains a social media presence with accounts on X (14,000 followers), Facebook (1.8 million followers), TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.
UTV https://utviraq.net/	It is not a strictly news channel but a general one (described as general entertainment, though it also has a news segment), also available live online; the website is only in Arabic and is rather sparse in terms of informational content. It has a presence on various social media platforms, including X (142 thousand followers). The founder and president is Samad al-Khanjar (a Sunni, son of the well-known politician Khamis al-Khanjar). There are possible ties to Qatar through beIN Network. Khanjar was long supported by Turkiye and Qatar and previously had connections to Saddam Hussein's regime. In 2015, he was accused of supporting terrorism but later reached an agreement with pro-Iranian factions against his main Sunni rival Halbusi. In 2024, he again found himself in conflict with pro-Iranian factions.
Al Fallujah https://alfallujah.tv/	It is not a strictly news channel but a general one (also available live online); the website is only in Arabic and relatively sparse in terms of informational content. It has a presence on social media platforms: X (70 thousand), Facebook (5.6 million), TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.
Alnujaba https://alnujaba.ir/	Also an Arabic-language website; affiliated with the pro-Iranian militia Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, subject to U.S. sanctions; its X account is suspended, but it remains active on Telegram; radically pro-Iranian and anti-Western, though of lower quality compared to Al Ahad or Alghadeer; the website is poorly updated and sparse in informational content; no online streaming available.
Al Afaq https://www.afaq.tv/	Founded by Nouri al-Maliki, Shiite, with a pro-Iranian narrative; access to the website https://www.afaq.tv/ was blocked by the USA in 2021; the new website is https://afaq.iq/; inactive on social media since 2020.

Asia Network Television	The website is blocked by the USA; on X (https://x.com/asiatvt) – 68 thousand followers; Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/LREGN9/) – 62 thousand followers; the television channel is still operating.
Alfarqadain	Shiite television, no website but present on Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram.
Al Taliah	Arabic-language television channel, with no active website or online streaming; YouTube account has 2.7 million followers, while the number of followers on other social media platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram, Telegram) is very small; Shiite.
Al Eshraq https://aleshraqtv.iq/	Arabic-language television and website; broadcasting live online; Shia, possibly associated with the acting parliamentary speaker Muhsin al-Mandalawy (to be verified), pro-Iranian and anti-American, strongly focusing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role of the USA; social media presence: X (400 followers); YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, and TikTok.
Iraq24 https://iraq24hd.com/	Arabic-language satellite television broadcasting from Dubai and dedicated to economic and business issues; live online streaming and a rather modest website; on X – 9,000 followers; also Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.
Al Ayam; Al Walaa; Al Rased; Al Hashdna, ; Al Ebaa, Al Biladi, Babylon	No online activity.
TV Anwar https://anwartv2.com/	Associated with muqawama, anti-Western and anti-Saudi; news service on website; everything in Arabic; presence on X (43,000), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube.
Mowafaq https://al-mawqef.com/	Arabic-language television associated with the Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia; also a website in Arabic containing news and political articles (pro-Iranian); presence on X (1.2k), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube; no live online streaming.

In 2021, the US Department of Justice seized 33 websites used by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU), including pro-Iranian media in Iraq, as well as three websites of Kata'ib Hezbollah. The Department stated that these sites were on domains owned by the US, which constitutes a sanctions violation.

Other media

Radio stations	
Radio al Nakhla	Arabic
Radio al-Bilad	Arabic, Shia, mainly religious
Radio al Mirbad	Arabic, broadcasts from Basra – collaborates with BBC
Radio Nawa	Both radio and website in two languages: Kurdish and Arabic, broadcasts from Sulaymaniyah – collaborates with BBC
Radio al Salam	Broadcasts from Erbil in Arabic and Kurdish languages
Radio Ur FM	Arabic
Radio Shafaq	Kurdish and English
RP News	Arabic, Shia – Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/RpNews1/)

Websites	
Shafaq News https://shafaq.com/	(English, Arabic, and Kurdish) – Professional news portal, Kurdish but with a nationwide Iraqi reach and aimed at a general Iraqi audience; rather objective and critical of Iran and Shia militias, lots of information from Kurdistan (positive for KDP); present on X (9k), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram; additionally 2 radio channels: in Kurdish and English; Shafaq News is run by the Shafaq Foundation - established on March 1, 2004, in Baghdad. It is a Shia-Kurdish (Fayli) foundation. In 2022, Shafaq News signed a deal with BBC.
NINA (National Iraqi News Agency) https://www.ninanews.com/website	Established in 2005, advertises itself as independent, a rich news service available in Arabic and English; key figures: Moayad al-Lami, Shafiq al-Obaidi, Hafez al-Rawi.
Masalah https://almasalah.com/	Professional portal, rich in both news and opinion-forming content; relatively neutral but sometimes critical of the USA; also critical of religious parties; key people: Samir Obaid, Muhammad Saded Sadiqian, Zaki al-Saadi, Rias al-Fartusi; inactive on social media.

National News Center https://nnciraq.com/	Website in Arabic, rather weak updates; Shia and rather Islamist.
1001 Iraqi Thoughts https://1001iraqithoughts.com/	Independent, English-language analytical portal, publishing very interesting analyses; secular perspective, pro-reform and deep insider view; on X – 11k followers; publisher Hamza Hadad.
Al Masra https://almasra.iq/	Arabic-language website associated with the Kurdish PUK, rather party propaganda.
Al Rai https://alrray.org/	Known also as Public Opinion News Agency (PONA or RP News) – Shia, associated with radio al Rai; presence on X (5k followers); the director is Muhannad al Aqabi closely linked to Hashd al-Shaabi (Team Media War).
Info Plus https://www.infoplusnetwork.com/	Shia portal, strongly anti-American; focused on Iraq.
Baghdad Times https://baghdad-times.net/	Mainly Iraqi affairs.
Central News https://centrals.news/world/	Mainly Iraqi and Arab affairs; Shia, associated with pro-Iranian factions.
Hath al Youm https://hathalyoum.net/	News service in Arabic, Kurdish, and English, also local news from the provinces.
+964 Media https://964media.com/	News service in Arabic, Kurdish, and English, also local news from the provinces; associated with Hath al Youm and Shias, mainly Nouri al-Maliki.
Wijhat https://wijhat.org/	Founder and editor-in-chief Mustafa Kamel, Sunni and pan-Arab, critical of Iran but also anti-Western; social media – refers to Mustafa Kamel's X account (84.5k followers).
Alam al Harbi website (media wing of Hashd al-Shaabi) https://al-hashed.gov.iq/	Mainly information about military operations conducted; in social media: X (https://x.com/teamsmediawar - 1.3m); Facebook, Instagram, Telegram.

Iraqi News https://www.iraqinews.com/	English-language portal, created in 2000, likely developed in Bahrain. News service quite sparse, though updated daily, dominated by news pulled from various news agencies. Present on X (11k), Facebook, and Instagram.
Iraq Oil Report https://www.iraqoilreport.com/	English-language portal dedicated to Iraqi oil industry affairs (including political aspects), edited by an American team.
Iraq Sun https://www.iraqsun.com/	English-language online journal, created in Australia and inactive on social media.
Hewar Mutamaddin https://www.ahewar.org/debat/nr.asp	Arabic-language portal associated with the left-wing foundation of the same name; more opinion-forming than news-oriented; also active on X (9k followers), YouTube, Facebook.
Facelraq https://www.faceiraq.org	Arabic-language news portal providing information from various sources, both Iraqi, Arab, and global.
Al Ghad https://alghadpress.com	Arabic-language news portal with a rich service and rather neutral, 3.8k followers on X, also present on Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube.
Buratha News Agency https://burathanews.com/	Portal associated with the "Islamic resistance in Iraq", rich service, also international; no activity on X.
Sot al Iraq (Głos Iraku) https://www.sotaliraq.com/	Left-wing portal with a rich news service; mainly Iraqi and Arab world affairs; on X – 8k followers, also on Facebook, YouTube.
Bagdad Today https://baghdadtoday.news/	Portal with a high degree of professionalism.
LNA https://www.lnaiq.com/	Portal with a high degree of professionalism, declaring neutrality. Despite attempts to maintain objectivity in narrative, Shia and pro-Iranian tendencies are visible. Characterized by moderate reach in social media, but regularly publishes content.
Al Jeebal	Portal dedicated to Iraqi and regional affairs, established in 2023, with a narrative that appears neutral; among journalists are both Arabs and

https://aljeebal.com/	Kurds, including Kurdish political scientist from Erbil Bazar Sharif, who also writes for Washington Institute; Rasheed Sufi, who also writes for New Region and Jummar; Ali al-Araji, also writing for Jummar; Mustafa al-Saray, simultaneously being the Director of Research and Studies at Al Bayan Center for Studies and Planning (this indicates a fairly objective nature of this medium, as Al Bayan is a reputable think tank, but at the same time al-Saray visited the People's Republic of China in July 2024 as a member of an Iraqi delegation consisting of representatives of research centers and media. The delegation also visited the Chinese television station CGTN Arabic in Beijing, where they discussed strengthening media communication between the parties and presenting objective views on common topics. Additionally, the delegation met with representatives of the Chinese Institute of International Studies, affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs); 100k followers on Facebook.
Ultra Iraq https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/	Portal critically oriented towards pro-Iranian forces (muqawama); 7k followers on X.com; part of the Ultra Sawt network broadcasting from Qatar.
Al Maalomah https://almaalomah.me/	Narrative aggressively anti-Western, pro-Iranian, pro-Russian; portal accessible only through VPN; no activity on Facebook and X.com.
Al Kitabat https://kitabab.com/	Narrative anti-Western, Shia, pro-Iranian and pro-Russian, poor graphic design, no activity on Facebook and X.com.
Al Aalem al Jadeed https://al-aalem.com/	Opinion-forming portal, regularly publishing interesting reports and opinions, less news-oriented, trying to maintain objectivity and criticizing authorities, but at the same time sometimes susceptible to anti-American narrative and occasionally Russian propaganda (not in an aggressive manner characteristic of muqawama media).
WAA (Iraqi Media Information Agency) https://al-iraqinews.com/	Shia, very modest news service, a few news items daily
Shafaqna – Shia News Association https://iraq.shafaqna.com/	Several language versions, including English, Russian, and Turkish, associated with Shia religious authorities (Sistani), lots of religious matters and Shia world issues but also plenty of political information and commentary, no aggressive propaganda.

Karbala International Agency (International Media Center – IMC) https://karbala-intel.net/arabic	Associated with the Imam Hussein Mausoleum in Karbala, declares its goal is to show Islam as a religion of peace and far from extremism, and to build bridges; political topics are also addressed but without aggressive narrative.
The New Region https://thenewregion.com/	English-language portal dedicated to the Middle East but with special emphasis on Iraq and Kurdistan; authors both from the region and Western; professional.
Jummar https://jummar.media/	Analytical portal in Arabic and English; professional and independent, supported among others by National Endowment for Democracy, WILPF, IMS and European Endowment for Democracy.

Press Titles	
Al Mada https://almadapaper.net/	Arabic-language daily newspaper published in Baghdad, also having an online PDF version, and additionally a website in Arabic with a news service; left-wing provenance (secular tradition, anti-Islamist, communist-nationalist, critical of authorities), large circulation and very well-known, with a good reputation, editor-in-chief Fahri Karim; present in social media: X (9.5k), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube.
Al Mashriq	Editor-in-chief Sabah al-Lami. No available information about the current activity of the portal – the website is inactive, and the last update on Facebook is from 2022.
Tariq al Shaab https://www.tareeqashab.com/	Newspaper of the Iraqi Communist Party; more commentary than information; online edition in PDF, and additionally a website with its own content; social media links refer to Iraqi Communist Party accounts; moreover, a cultural weekly Al Saqafi in online PDF.
Azzaman https://www.azzaman.com/	Popular Arabic-language daily newspaper founded and published by Saad al-Bazzaz; pan-Arab provenance, critical of both Iran and the USA; other key people: international edition editor-in-chief Fateh Abdel Salam, Iraqi edition editor-in-chief Ahmed Abdel Majeed; besides the news service (more commentary and opinion-forming than news-oriented), the website also features a newspaper edition in PDF (in 3 publishing versions – international, Iraqi, and sports, all in Arabic); accounts on X (1.7k) and Facebook.
Al Sabah Al Dzadid	Arabic-language daily newspaper and website, editor-in-chief: Adnan al-Sarraj, founder: Ismail Zayer, besides the website, also online PDF

http://newsabah.com/	edition; has a reputation for being independent, objective, and secular; on X – 45k followers, also present on Facebook and YouTube.
Al Sakaf al Jadid (New Culture) https://althakafaaljadida.net/	Left-wing opinion-forming magazine; also published online in PDF format.

1.1.3 Regional Media — Kurdistan

TV and Radio ¹	
NRT https://www.nrttv.com/Default.aspx	Kurdish-language television, also available live online streaming; two channels – one news-oriented and one more general; opposition-affiliated, connected with the New Generation Movement of Sheswar Abdulwahid, who was its owner; its journalists have been targets of Kurdish security services, especially in PDK territories; it also has a website (in Kurdish and Arabic, previously had an English version but currently inactive); journalists are sometimes targets of KRG security services, especially PDK; Nalia FM radio is also associated with NRT; presence in social media: X (Kurdish version – 1.2k, Arabic version – 143k), Facebook, YouTube.
Kurdsat https://www.kurdsat.tv/	General news channel - (https://www.kurdsatnews.com/), television and radio in Kurdish language available online in live streaming; associated with PUK, website in Kurdish and Arabic languages (there is also an English version but not updated); also has a radio (available online as well); present on X (Kurdish version – 89k), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube.
KNN https://www.knnc.net/	Kurdish-language television associated with the Gorran party; portal in Kurdish, Arabic, and English, quite oppositional.
Kurdistan TV https://kurdistantv.net/	Satellite television closely associated with PDK (highly propagandistic), broadcasting in Kurdish and available live online, also has a website in 4 languages: Sorani, Kurmanji, Arabic, and Farsi; present on X (in Sorani – 8.5k followers), Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, YouTube.
Zagros TV https://zagrosnews.net/	Arabic-language Kurdish television (website also in Arabic), affiliated with PDK, available in live online streaming, present on X (6k followers), Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, TikTok.
Zoom https://zoomnews.info/	Kurdish-language television available also in live online streaming, founded by Lahur Talabani (formally owned by Al-Ma'adel al-Dhahabi company); website in Kurdish and English; also has a radio (also available live online); present on X (in English, 1.8k followers), Instagram, Telegram, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat.

¹ Most television channels are affiliated with one party, or even a specific faction within a given party.

Speda TV	Kurdish-language, also radio; belongs to the Kurdish Islamic Union – Kurdish Islamists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood (https://www.speda.net/); website in Sorani, Kurmanji, and Arabic; also broadcasts live online; merely 281 followers on X; also has a radio (also available online).
WAAR	Kurdish-language (Kurmanji) television broadcasting from Duhok, affiliated with PDK (Nechirwan Barzani), general in nature but with an informative and journalistic section; website (https://waarmedia.com/), in Sorani and Kurmanji, lacks a news service; on X – 22k followers, also present in other social media; also has a radio; radio and TV available online as well.
Kirkuk TV, KRT https://kirkuktv.net/KU/Default	Controlled by PUK, portal in Kurdish and Arabic languages; also has a radio (TV and radio in Kurdish); focused on local issues; lacks social media activity.
Gali TV - GK Sat https://www.gksat.tv/	Controlled by PUK, portal in Kurdish language (informationally almost exclusively Kurdish topics), broadcasting from Kalar; also broadcasts live online; on X only 430 followers, also present on other social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram).
Sterk TV https://sterktv1.net/	Kurdish-language (Kurmanji) television associated with PKK (but legal – registered in Sulaymaniyah), also has a website (with podcasts in other Kurdish dialects), available live online, exclusively Kurdish topics, mainly related to PKK and Kurdish rights; present on X (10k followers); Facebook (86k), Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram.
Khak TV https://www.khaktv.net/	Television and radio associated with PUK, dedicated to cultural issues.

Websites and Press Titles

In the Kurdistan Region, there are very many internet portals, but most of them are not updated very frequently (a few items daily) and are predominantly focused on Kurdish topics. However, there are also several more professional portals (Basnews, Xendan) and newspapers (Hewlati, Avena, Kurdistan Nwe). Most portals are either associated with a specific political group (which is often very apparent) or are portals attacking the KRG authorities for corruption and authoritarianism.

Websites and Press Titles	
Basnews https://www.basnews.com/	A very professional and popular news portal associated with PDK, with many news items, comments, and opinions; language versions: Sorani, Kurmanji, Arabic and English (separate language accounts on X: Sorani – 14k; English – 16k; Kurmanji – 10k; Arabic – 2k); topics mainly Kurdish and Iraqi; owned by Masrour Barzani.
Xendan https://www.xendan.org/	Kurdish-language, quite professional news portal associated with PUK; alongside Kurdish and Iraqi topics, also has a quite rich international service; presence in social media: X (39k), Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram.
PUK Media https://www.pukmedia.com/	News website run by PUK in languages: Sorani, Kurmanji, Arabic and English; presence in social media; on X separate language accounts: Sorani - 200; Kurmanji – 100; English – 8.8k; Arabic – 90), as well as in other social media; topics mainly Kurdish but also in an international context.
Kurdistan Nwe Nowy Kurdystan	https://www.knwe.org/ ; Kurdish-language daily popular in territories controlled by PUK (published by this party); Kurdish, Iraqi, and international topics; no PDF version online but the website content is quite rich, with international themes as well; lacks current activity in social media.
Awena https://www.awene.com/	Weekly magazine and website published in Sulaymaniyah (in Kurdish language), founded by Asos Ahmed Hardi; has a reputation for being independent and is one of the most important publications in Kurdistan; PDF edition is not available online but is available for a fee via mailing; 15k followers on X, 522k on Facebook.
Hawlati https://www.hawlati.co/	Independent, relatively left-wing weekly magazine and website in Kurdish, owned by Tariq Fatih and directed by Kamal Rauf; the newspaper is not available in PDF format; 1.8k followers on X; also on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube; topics mainly Kurdish-Iraqi.
Spee Media https://speemedia.com/	Kurdish-language news portal from Sulaymaniyah, founder: Shuan Mohammed (previously associated with Awene and Hewlati); topics primarily Kurdish.
Kurdfile https://kurdfile.com/	Website dedicated to tracking corruption in KRG.

Kurdistan Watch https://kurdistanwatch.substack.com/	Independent, English-language analytical portal dedicated to Kurdistan Region issues, 12.4k followers on X.
Kirkuk Now https://www.kirkuknow.com	Portal in Kurdish, Arabic, and English; local news service dedicated to the issues of Kirkuk province and Kurdistan Region; not affiliated with any specific party; present on X (English version – 4.5k followers), Facebook, YouTube, Instagram.
Lvin Press/Magazine https://lvinpress.com/	Kurdish-language socio-political-cultural magazine (unavailable online) published every 10 days and news service in Kurdish and English; website quite poor in content, more active on Facebook (126k followers), however absent on X; Lvin, published in Sulaymaniyah, is considered independent and objective, critical of the Region's authorities (complains of being a target of cyberattacks); topics mainly Kurdish but sometimes also international (including about Russia and the war in Ukraine).
Esta Media Network https://esta.krd/	Website associated with PUK, news service concentrated on Kurdistan Region issues and rather sparse, though there are also foreign news items; has 2.7k followers on X; also includes other digital media but not available online.
Hawler News https://hawlerweb.net/	Local website from Erbil associated with PDK, as well as the Hawler newspaper, also available in PDF version online; topics mainly Kurdish.
Gulan https://gulanmedia.com/	Website and weekly newspaper also available online in PDF version; associated with PDK; 1.3k followers on X; also present in other social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube).
Kurdrawm https://www.kurdrawm.com/	Opinion-forming portal, focusing on cultural and scientific issues but also publishing commentaries on political matters (from an intellectual perspective); irregular publications; presence in social media with small reach.
Kurdish Globe https://kurdishglobe.krd/	English-language newspaper (weekly) and internet portal, created in Erbil, founded in 2005; associated with PDK..
Kurdistan Press https://www.kurdistanpress.net/	Portal associated with PDK; not very rich in content but with large reach on Facebook – 689k; not very active in other social media.
Xwakurk	Portal associated with PDK, concentrated on Kurdish issues.

1.1.4 Other Regional Media

In the provinces (muhafazas) of Iraq, local media operate, including television stations such as in particular: Al-Anbar TV, Al-Babelyia, Salahaddin TV.

Al-Mowselya TV (Mosul) (<https://www.twitch.tv/almawsleyatv>); presence on X - <https://x.com/ALMAWSLEYATV> - 4k followers; also present on Facebook.

Nasiriyah – a local information portal, <https://nasiriyah.org/ar/>, as well as radio, on X – 13.5 thousand followers, also on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram.

1.1.5 Media associated with religious organizations and ethnoreligious minority groups

In Iraq, including Kurdistan, there are a number of media outlets, including television channels, that are exclusively religious in nature (Muslim). Additionally, there are media associated with ethnic and religious minorities such as the Assyrians/Chaldeans (Christians), Turkmens, Yazidis, as well as Shia religious TV channels: Karbala TV (<https://www.karbala-tv.iq/>), Ahl al Bayt TV, Al Anwar (<https://alanwar.tv/>), and TV Minhaj (<https://minhaj-tv.com/>).

Websites	
Zowaa	The website of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, which also publishes the magazine Bhra; the site is available in Arabic, English, and Syriac.
Syriac Press https://syriacpress.com/	A website dedicated to the issues of the Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac community throughout the Middle East; critical of Hezbollah; focusing mainly on the affairs of this ethnic minority and Christian topics; available in three language versions: Suroyo, Arabic, and English.
Ishtar TV https://ishtartv.com/	Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac television channel broadcasting online, with a website mainly providing information about this community as well as other global news. The site also has an English-language version. The broadcasts include programs in Assyrian (Syriac), Arabic, and Kurdish, and the station transmits from Ainkawa in Erbil (Irbil).
AINA (Assyrian International News Agency) http://www.aina.org/	Assyrian news agency and portal; focuses on issues concerning Assyrians.
Mangish https://mangish.net/	Arabic-language Christian news portal; the subject matter is not limited to issues concerning Christians in Iraq but covers a wide range of topics.

Turkmenli TV http://turkmenelitv.com	Television and radio belonging to the Iraqi Turkmen Front; broadcasting from Kirkuk but also having an office in Baghdad and cooperating with Turkish television; it is not a strictly news channel, and on the website there are only the most important news items (in the news section); also live online streaming (both radio and TV); on X – 4,500 followers.
Kerkuk Net Haber Ajensi kerkuk.net	The Turkmen news agency and website, also present on X with about 9,700 followers.
Kerkuk Gazetesi https://kerkukgazetesi.com/	Turkish-language website with a mixed informational, political, opinion-forming, cultural, and social character. Its focus is on news about Iraqi Turkmen and the Turanian world, especially Turkiye. It is active on Facebook and X, but with relatively small audience reach, having about 5,300 followers on Facebook and 2,700 on X.
Lalish TV https://www.youtube.com/@LalishTV/streams	Yazidi satellite television channel whose content mainly focuses on the social and cultural issues of the Yazidi community.
Ezidi24 https://ezidi24.com/	An independent portal dedicated to Yazidi issues has about 2,500 followers on X and is also active on other social media platforms.
Lalish Media Network https://www.lalishduhok.com/	In Sorani, Kurmanji, and Arabic; editorial office in Dohuk and affiliated with the KDP; affiliated with the Lalish Cultural and Social Center; mainly focused on Yazidi and Kurdish matters but also covers other news; 8,000 followers on X; also active on Facebook and YouTube.

1.1.6 Foreign media

The media environment in Iraq is significantly shaped by foreign media, which can be categorized into Arab media, Kurdish media, and Arabic-language branches of international media primarily from the USA, UK, Russia, China, and Iran. A portion of these foreign media outlets specifically targets Iraqi audiences.

Arab media: the fact that the Iraqi media market is very extensive limits the reach of pan-Arab media. Moreover, most of these are Sunni media, while Sunni Arabs constitute only about 19% of Iraq's population. The most popular pan-Arab channel is Al Jazeera, which until at least 2014 criticized the new Shiite authorities in Iraq and was accused of inciting Sunnis against U.S. forces in Iraq and the government, as well as the Saudi channel Al Arabiya.

Russian, Iranian, and Chinese media: RT Arabic; Sputnik Arabic; CGTN Arabic; Russia News (https://x.com/mog_Russ); China in Arabic (https://x.com/mog_china); Al Alam TV (<https://www.alalam.ir/>).

Global media: CNN Arabic (<https://arabic.cnn.com/>); BBC Arabic (<https://www.bbc.com/arabic>); Sky News Arabia (<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/>); France24 Arabic (<https://www.france24.com/ar/>); Voice of America (no Arabic-language version, but there are Kurdish-language radio and portals in Sorani and Kurmanji: <https://www.dengiamerika.com/>; <https://www.dengeamerika.com/>).

Other foreign media	
TV Al Hurra https://www.alhurra.com	A television channel and website funded by the USA for the Arab world, with a special channel and subpage dedicated to Iraq.
Radio Sawa https://www.radiosawa.com/	A television channel and website funded by the USA for the Arab world, with a special channel and subpage dedicated to Iraq.
MBC Iraq https://x.com/MBCIRAQtv/ https://www.youtube.com/@MBCIRAQChannel	A general television channel that is part of the Saudi media conglomerate MBC.
Amwaj Media https://amwaj.media/	One of the best analytical portals dedicated to Middle Eastern issues is edited in the United Kingdom with many contributors from Iraq. It features three thematic sections: Iran, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula, and is available in three languages: English, Arabic, and Farsi. The portal is known for frequent updates and a high degree of objectivity.
Al Monitor https://www.al-monitor.com/	A portal containing articles, analyses, and podcasts dedicated to the MENA region, offering a massive volume of material with daily updates; its authors come from both the region and beyond; the platform is independent and objective.
Arabian Defence https://www.arabiandefence.com	A portal dedicated to arms and defense issues in the Arab world (in English).

Kurdish and Kurdish-language media	
Kurdpress https://www.kurdpress.com/	A news portal created in Iran in Kurdish, Turkish, Persian, and English.
Ronahi TV https://ronahi.tv/	A television channel broadcasting from Syrian Kurdistan and affiliated with the SDF/YPG; a comprehensive news service (including international news, for example, strong coverage of the war in Ukraine); a website available in Kurmanji and Arabic; blocked on X, Facebook, and YouTube.
ANF (Firat News), https://anfenglishmobile.com/	A news service in 10 languages (including Kurmanji, Sorani, Arabic, English, Russian, Persian, Turkish); primarily focused on Kurdish issues but not exclusively; a rich content service; ideologically associated with Apoism (PKK, Rojava); edited in Amsterdam.
ANHA https://hawarnews.com/	The Kurdish news agency broadcasting from Rojava and affiliated with the Kurdish authorities there is the Hawar News Agency (ANHA). It offers a rich, regularly updated website available in six languages: Kurmanji, Arabic, English, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish. While its core focus is on Kurdish issues, its coverage extends beyond to broader regional and international topics. The agency is active on social media but has a relatively small following on X (around 2,000 followers) compared to other platforms.
Mezopotamia Ajansi https://mezopotamyaaajansi35.com/	A portal edited by Turkish Kurds and sympathizing with the DEM Party in Turkiye, focusing on Kurdish issues; available in three language versions: English, Kurmanji, and Turkish.

1.2 Alternative media

Almost all Iraqi media, including Kurdish outlets, have their own social media accounts. However, some pro-Iranian media are blocked on platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram. Many media organizations, as well as think tanks and other groups, also use messaging apps like WhatsApp to send news alerts and create discussion groups. Political parties, other organizations, government institutions, politicians, and religious, military, and tribal leaders are also active on social media.

1.2.1 Social media

A. Media accounts:

The largest reach on X, Facebook, and Instagram is held by Iraq Media Network, Rudaw, Al Sharqiya, Al Sumaria, Basnews, and Xendan, with somewhat smaller but still notable presence for Kurdistan24, Zoomnews, and Al Ahad. Meanwhile, NRT, Kurdsat, Al Forat, and Al Sabah maintain regular but lower activity (several posts daily). Posts on X generate low interaction in terms of likes and comments, whereas Facebook sees significantly more engagement. For example, posts from the Kurdish-language Rudaw Facebook account receive on average from several hundred to a few thousand likes, and between dozens and hundreds of comments, with dozens of posts published daily. Similar interaction patterns are observed for Al Sharqiya and Al Forat. Slightly smaller engagement is recorded for Kurdistan24, NRT, KNN, Al Sumaria, Al Dijlah, Al Rabiaa, Al Rasheed, Al Awla, I-News, Bas News, and Xendan, usually amounting to several hundred likes and tens of comments, yet their Facebook activity remains substantial. Al Sabah newspaper posts several to a dozen times daily, with likes ranging from several thousand to tens of thousands, and comments from several dozen up to hundreds. INA and Iraqi Radio show considerably less Facebook interaction, although they also post several to over a dozen times daily. Al Ghadeer TV posts several dozen entries daily but receives only a few dozen likes and a handful of comments per post. Similar low interaction is seen on Samarra TV, Baghdadiyah TV, and UTV TV

Al Etejah and Al Rafidain have even lower interaction and activity. Some media outlets, such as Asia Media Network and Al Eshraq, publish only a few posts weekly on Facebook with sporadic interactions. Shafaq News posts at least a dozen times daily on Facebook but with occasional interactions. Hawlati also posts about a dozen times daily but with low interactions; Spee Media has similar activity but better engagement, while Awena posts only a few times per week. Azzaman and Al Mada publish several posts daily on Facebook but do not generate significant interactions. Similar levels of interaction occur on Instagram. There is considerable interaction during live online broadcasts on YouTube (e.g., Rudaw).

Some Iraqi media, especially those with an anti-Western stance, also use platforms such as Eitaa.com (an Iranian platform similar to Telegram), Aparat.com (an Iranian video-sharing site operating like YouTube), Nabd.com (an Arabic news aggregation platform that sources heavily from Russia Today), as well as Odnoklassniki (ok.ru) and VKontakte.

A. Accounts of government, educational institutions; think tanks, religious institutions, including among others:

- The Russian Embassy (on X - <https://x.com/RusEmbassyIraq> - 20,000 followers, several hundred views, low interactions; on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/rusembassyiraq/> – 19,000 followers, with interactions); for comparison, the UK embassy has 136,000 followers on X; the US embassy – 172,000; while Poland has 1,700 (the consulate in Erbil 3,400).
- OIR Spokesman @OIRSpox (na X – 108 tys.)
- Media Branch of Hashd al-Shaabi, with 1.3 million followers on X @teamsmediawar
- KDP Foreign Relations @kdpfro

B. Accounts of politicians and other leaders

Many Iraqi politicians actively use social media, primarily X (formerly Twitter); Kurdish politicians are mainly present on Instagram, while many tribal sheikhs maintain profiles on Facebook. Regarding X accounts, the largest reach is held by figures such as:

- **Muqtada as-Sadr:** One of the most influential leaders who is very active on social media is Muqtada al-Sadr, who has 2.3 million followers on X. This is currently, alongside mosques associated with al-Sadr, his main communication channel, as he shut down his traditional media outlets after officially announcing his withdrawal from politics following an unsuccessful attempt to seize power in June 2022. Al-Sadr's posts receive hundreds of thousands of views, several to a dozen thousand likes, and 1-2 thousand comments. Previously, al-Sadr operated numerous media outlets, many of which have been closed, such as the website alsadronline.net (ceased in 2014); Al Hawza (shut down by the US in 2004); Sadr Al-Iraq (a satellite TV channel operating under a Czech license with a shopping profile, closed in 2016); and the website al3marh.net (closed in 2013). Other al-Sadr-related media that are likely defunct due to lack of information include the newspapers Sada al-Sadr, Ishraqat al-Sadr, Sadr al-Iraq, and the TV channels Al Taif and Al Shadharat;
- **Nouri al Maliki** – 1 million followers on X; comments disabled, irregular posts (no activity since July); several hundred likes; tens of thousands of views;
- **Ammar al-Hakim** – 910 tys. obserwujących, regularne wpisy, interakcje na poziomie kilkuset lajków i komentarzy;
- **Mohammad al-Sudani** – 910,000 followers, regular posts, interactions at the level of several hundred likes and comments;
- **Mustafa al-Kadhimi** – 1.5 million followers, irregular posts; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and 100–200 comments;
- **Haidar al-Abadi** – 1.3 million followers, irregular posts, lower interactions;
- **Kais al-Chazali** – 680,000 followers (irregular activity);

- Leading Sunni politicians have significantly smaller reach, for example, Khamis Khanjar – 472,000 followers on X, irregular posts, several dozen comments/100–200 likes; Mohammad al-Halbusi – no social media accounts;
- **Masud Barzani** – 600,000 followers, irregular posts; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and 100–200 comments;
- **Nechirwan Barzani** – 375,000 followers, irregular posts; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and several dozen comments; posts in English, Arabic, and Kurdish;
- **Masrour Barzani** – 500,000 followers, several to a dozen posts weekly; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and several dozen comments; posts in English, Arabic, and Kurdish;
- **Qubad Talabani** – 650,000 followers, irregular posts; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and 100–200 comments;
- **Bafel Talabani** – 50,000 followers, irregular posts; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and 100–200 comments; posts in English, Arabic, and Kurdish;
- **Lahur Talabani** – 60,000 followers, irregular posts; low interactions;
- **Barham Salih** – 1.1 million followers; irregular posts, low interactions;
- **Shaswar Abdulwahid** – 42,000 followers, irregular posts; interactions at the level of several hundred likes and 100–200 comments; posts in English, Arabic, and Kurdish; also has its own website (<https://shaswar.net/>).

C. Accounts of journalists, influencers, etc.

- **Brothersirq** – Information platform on social media (Telegram, Facebook, X, Instagram); (Arabic-language anti-sectarian, pro-reform account, 1 million followers) @Brothersirq
- **Wladimir van Wilgenburg** @vvanwilgenburg; a Dutch journalist covering Kurdistan and working for Kurdish media, mostly residing in Iraqi Kurdistan
- **Ali al Mikdam** – Iraqi journalist (Shiite, independent), publishes in Arabic, @ali_almikdam (32,000 followers)
- **Hamzeh Hadad**, Author of the page 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, English @HamzehKarkhi
- **Rasha al Aqeedi** – Pro-civic activist, 105,000 followers, @RashaAlAqeedi
- **Ahmed Alhusseiny** – An independent pro-civic journalist (Arabic), @AhmedBroadcast

- **Shams** – An independent female journalist associated with Ahmed Alhusieny, (Arabic) @shamsxbasheer
- **Fazel Hawramy** – Independent Kurdish journalist (English), @FazelHawramy
- **Kamal Chomani**, Kurdish analyst writing from Europe who is critical of the ruling parties in Kurdistan, with 37,500 followers, publishing in English @KamalChomani
- **Karwan Faidhi Dri** (Rudaw journalist, publishing in English) @KarwanFaidhiDr
- **Sajad Jiyad**, Analyst, 20,000 followers, English @SajadJiyad
- **Blesa Shaways** (Journalist from Kurdistan, close to the KDP, publishes in English) @Bilesa_Shaweys
- **Lawk Ghafuri** (Journalist from Kurdistan, publishes in English), @LawkGhafuri
- **Jared Szuba** (Al Monitor journalist, frequently writes about Iraq) @JM_Szuba
- **Kamaram Palani** – Kurdish expert from Iraq, affiliated with the Kurdish think tank MERI @KamaramPalani, publishes in English
- **Shivan Fazil** – Kurdish analyst, @ShivanFazil
- **Renad Mansour**, analyst, publishes in English, @renadmansour
- **Omar al Nidawi** –Iraqi analyst writing from the USA, English, @omar_nidawi
- **Ali al Bayati**, Former head of the Human Rights Commission, (Arabic), @aliakramalbayat
- **Safeen Dizayee** (Head of the Department of Foreign Relations, KRG) – Kurdish and English @SafeenDizayee
- **Hemn Hawrami** – a very influential figure in the KDP, also having good foreign relations, 200,000 followers @heminhawrami
- **Sufian Sammarai** - <https://x.com/SufianSamarrai>, 192,000 followers on X; Sunni sectarian narrative, extremely anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite, also anti-Hamas; at the same time anti-Western and sympathetic to Saddam Hussein; edited the website The Baghdad Post, which no longer appears; does not live in Iraq; pro-Russian;
- **Sabah al-Khozai** - <https://x.com/sabahalkhozai> 154,000 followers on X – Sunni sectarian; anti-Iranian, pro-Saudi, anti-Western, and pro-Russian;
- **Bassam al Karbalai** – a very important figure in the Shia world – he composes and sings Shia eulogies and has 11 million followers on YouTube; although there is no political content there, he can still exert influence in other ways. For example, the Russian ambassador Kutrashv conspicuously took part in group prayers led by Karbalaee.

- **Albasheer Show** – A satirical program, very often addressing political topics, for example, it played an important role during the anti-government protests in 2019; its creator and host is the journalist and comedian Ahmed al-Basheer (a Sunni from Ramadi living in Baghdad, but for some time lived in Jordan); his program is produced in cooperation with Deutsche Welle Arabic and the Kurdish NRT TV and has 7.2 million followers on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q64PGavtJDA>, and 4.9 million followers on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/albasheershow>. Very high interactions and views.
- **Tura News** – a very pro-Iranian and pro-Russian Shiite channel on Telegram, (<https://t.me/s/tura313>).
- **Sabereen News** – a Shiite channel on X.com (<https://x.com/sabreens11>) and Telegram (<https://t.me/SabrenNews22>), spreading a pro-Iranian and pro-Russian narrative (the main theme on Telegram is 'we will protect you from NATO lies').
- **Moscow** – A pro-Russian Kurdish-language account very active on Facebook (38,000 followers) (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100080269815742>).
- **WorldEvent** – pro-Russian Kurdish-language account on Facebook (3,900 followers); quite active (https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61564949154433&comment_id=Y29tbWVudDo4OTkzODEzOTU2NTkwNTVfOTMyMzk1MjU4Nzc1Mzc3).
- **XYZ Graphics** – A sensationalist Kurdish-language YouTube channel, 181,000 subscribers; prone to spreading disinformation (<https://www.youtube.com/@XYZGraphics>).
- **Xumas** – 16,000 followers; pro-Saddam, pro-Sunni, anti-Iranian, anti-Shiite, and anti-Western but also anti-Russian; publishes in English (https://x.com/xumas_ig).
- **Abdullah Hekmat** – has 1.1 million followers; also has a YouTube channel; theoretically, the account is dedicated to sports, but there are also political comments (Sunni narrative) (<https://x.com/BaghdadTv>).
- **Hifa Fouad** – 25,000 followers, pro-Shia narrative, pro-Iran/Russia/Assad; anti-Western; spreads fake news (https://x.com/H_Fuoad96).
- **Hydikm** – 15,000 followers, Shia narrative, pro-Iranian, pro-Russian, and anti-Western; susceptible to fake news(<https://x.com/Hydikm>).
- **Al Arabiya Iraq** – 3 million followers (Al Arabiyah Saudi television's account on X.com dedicated to Iraq) (https://x.com/AlArabiya_Iraq).
- **Ishtarforimmigrationandasylum** – 231 thousand followers, an account focused on migration-related information, susceptible to narratives attacking, among others, Poland for the fate of migrants; also shares other information related to Iraq and Syria; vulnerable to propaganda and disinformation (<https://www.facebook.com/Ishtarforimmigrationandasylum/>).

- **Iraqi Cartoon** – 12 thousand followers, an account dedicated to drawing and caricature; some posts have a political tone (<https://www.facebook.com/iraqcartoon>).
- **Kurdistan CT** – 7.2 million followers, the account of the General Directorate for Combating Terrorism; regular posts about events in Iraq, Kurdistan, and the region (not only related to terrorism but generally security politics), promotes the Barzanis, especially Masrour (<https://www.facebook.com/KURDISTAN.CT>).

1.3 Recurring events and happenings

The most important recurring event in Kurdistan, apart from religious holidays, is Newroz, the Kurdish-Iranian New Year (March 21). It is also celebrated beyond Kurdish lands and is a public holiday. On this day, bonfires are lit, and in the following days, picnics are organized. Regarding Muslim holidays, for the Shia majority the most significant are Ashura (a movable feast based on the lunar calendar) and Arbaeen (40 days after Ashura). During this time, millions of Shia pilgrims, especially from Iran, travel to Iraq. Additionally, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, and Mawlid (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday) are celebrated, along with smaller Shia festivals such as the birthdays of Fatima Zahra (daughter of Muhammad and wife of Ali, mother of Hussein) and Eid al-Ghadeer, when Ali was appointed the Prophet's successor. Iraq's Sufi brotherhoods, including the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandi orders, also hold their own events.

If we talk about secular holidays, the Kurds celebrate Flag Day on December 17. Other important dates include: August 3 (anniversary of the beginning of the Yazidi genocide in Sinjar); September 25 (anniversary of the 2017 independence referendum – this day is mythologized by the KDP); March 16 (chemical attack on Halabja – commemorated mainly in the southern part of Kurdistan); March 1 (anniversary of Mustafa Barzani's death – celebrated by the KDP, with ceremonies held at his grave in the town of Barzan); July 31 (anniversary of the massacre of members of the Barzani clan by Saddam Hussein's regime during the Anfal campaign). In Arab Iraq, the following holidays are observed: Victory Day on December 10 (anniversary of the defeat of ISIS); Independence Day on October 3; Republic Day on July 14 (overthrow of the monarchy – mainly celebrated by leftist groups); and Army Day on January 6 (commemoration of the founding of the Iraqi army in 1921). Pro-Iranian groups associated with Al-Hashd al-Shaabi hold their own events, usually organized by Alam Al-Harbi (War Media Team), related to the war against Saddam Hussein, the fight against the USA, and the fight against ISIS (for example, the anniversary of the killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qassem Soleimani). Leftist groups also celebrate International Women's Day (March 8) and Labor Day (May 1). Regarding Women's Day, it is officially observed by the Kurdish authorities as well, in order to create a positive impression in the West. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind events related to election campaigns for various elections in Iraq.

Religious holidays of minorities are also celebrated, especially Christmas and Easter (political leaders usually extend greetings to Christians, but the average Iraqi Muslim is not interested). Other important minority holidays include the Yazidi New Year celebrated in April and the Assyrian New Year celebrated on April 1.

1.4 Non-governmental organizations and other non-state entities influencing public opinion.

1.4.1 Educational institutions (higher education institutions)

There are over 100 public and private higher education institutions operating in Iraq, including about 30 in the Kurdistan Region. Universities are also important opinion-forming centers, as academic titles are highly respected in Iraq. Intellectuals are often invited to various events, including conferences. The most important universities are:

- A. **University of Baghdad** – a public university, the largest in Iraq, a vast complex with about 80,000 students; located in the Shiite district of Karrada.
- B. **Al Mustansiriya** – a renowned public university in Baghdad, whose traditions date back to the 13th century; located in the Sunni district of Adhamiyah.
- C. **Al-Nahrain University** – a very important public university in Baghdad, located in the Shiite district of Karrada;
- D. **Al-Turath University** – the most important private university in Baghdad, located in the Mansour district near the Green Zone;
- E. **American University of Iraq in Baghdad (AIUB)** - a private university opened in 2021, modeled after similar institutions in the Kurdistan Region or, for example, in Beirut;
- F. **The University of Kufa (public) and the Islamic University of Najaf** – both universities collaborate closely, and the Islamic university has a high reputation and does not focus solely on religious education; Najaf (and nearby Kufa) is the heart of Shiite Iraq;
- G. **The University of Sulaimani** – a public university educating about 25,000 students; Sulaimani is traditionally recognized as the main intellectual center of Kurdistan;
- H. **Salahaddin University-Erbil** (public)
- I. **The American University of Kurdistan** – a renowned private university with a large campus in the suburbs of Dohuk;
- J. **University of Kurdistan Hewler** – A public university established on the initiative of Nechirvan Barzani.

1.4.2 Non-governmental organizations

There are few fully independent non-governmental organizations in Iraq, which is due to the extensive politicization of the public sphere, the role of political parties and their affiliated militias, as well as financial issues (linked to the muhasasa system, i.e., the allocation of state offices to parties as their quasi-feudal fiefs). It is also important to remember that alongside political parties and militias, tribes constitute a significant center of social and informational

influence. Additionally, there are many influential religious institutions, both Muslim and those connected with ethno-religious minorities.

Non-governmental organizations	
Team Media War (Alam al Harbi)	Hashed al-Shaabi, and especially the muqawama (resistance groups), is supported by various para-nongovernmental institutions, with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) playing a key role in organizing various events; individual groups within Hashed al-Shaabi also have their own analytical centers, such as the Badr Strategic Studies Center. (https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100095176501205).
Rafidain Center for Dialogue	One of the most important research institutions in Iraq, based in Najaf and Bagdadi; it organizes annual conferences in Baghdad attended by ministers, high-ranking military commanders, ambassadors (from Russia, Iran, as well as European countries); experts (from both Iran and the West, including the USA), politicians (ranging from participants in anti-government protests, Kurds, to representatives of pro-Iranian factions); tribal sheikhs, and others.
Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies	One of the most influential Iraqi think tanks, focused on political, social, and economic research. Al-Bayan conducts analyses of domestic and international policy as well as Iraq's development strategies; it has a very extensive website in Arabic and English. The center produces many analyses concerning Russia, including the war in Ukraine and Russia-West relations; it maintains contacts with Western embassies, participates in conferences in Europe, and is also expanding ties with China. In June 2024, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies organized a seminar dedicated to Iraqi-Chinese relations, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum. Participants included the Chinese ambassador to Iraq, Cui Wei; Iraq's Deputy Foreign Minister, Dr. Hisham Al-Alawi; and the Prime Minister's advisor on foreign relations, Farhad Alaeddin. The event was moderated by Mustafa Al-Saray, Director of Research at Al-Bayan Center.
Iraqi Institute for Economic Reform (IIER)	A think tank focused on economic research and proposing economic reforms that can support Iraq's development and economic stability. It concentrates on public sector reform and improving investment conditions; (https://iier.org/) – website available in Arabic and English.
The Middle East Research Institute (MERI)	Based in Erbil, affiliated with the KDP, MERI is one of the leading think tanks in the Kurdistan Region. It specializes in political analysis, democratic development, and security issues; its website is available in English, Arabic, and Kurdish (https://www.meri-k.org/); it has numerous publications; and it is open to cooperation with the West..
Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)	Operating at the American University of Iraq – Sulaimani, IRIS focuses on research related to regional politics, security, democracy, and economic development; (https://auis.edu.krd/iris/) – in English).

Al-Nahrain Center for Strategic Studies	A government think tank specializing in strategic research, particularly in the fields of national security and foreign policy (https://www.alnahrain.iq/ – in Arabic).
Rewaqa Baghdad Center	limited activity (https://rewaqbaghdad.org/en)

Other organizations are closely affiliated with political parties and politicians, including those that emerged from the 2019 anti-government protests, specifically the Tishreen Movement. However, these organizations are dispersed, and many have ceased to exist.

Al Baidar Center for Studies and Planning, <https://www.baidarcenter.org>, is not very active, but in 2022 it published writings about Dugin.

1.4.3 Tribes, mosques, brotherhoods, and religious foundations

There are over 100 tribes in Iraq, but the most important are the tribal confederations Dulaymi (Anbar), Shammar (Nineveh), and Jaburi (Salahaddin). Tribes currently do not play a major political role as they have lost it to political parties (and through them must seek political positions), but they still have an important social role, which is connected to the ongoing phenomenon of *asabiyya* (social solidarity) and the role of tribal judiciary. Moreover, a key socializing role (and consequently an informational one—bearing in mind that Iraqis, including Kurds, have a fondness for gossip and orally transmitted conspiracy theories) is played by Friday meetings at the sheikh's residence, combined with lunch and prayers at the mosque; sometimes such gatherings can attract up to 200 people. Tribes are also highly hierarchical, and sheikhs strengthen ties with cousins from other parts of Iraq through marriage alliances.

Mosques – the significance of mosques is immense; it is worth adding that they are not only places of prayer and worship but generally places of gathering for the *ummah* (community), and therefore there are no obstacles to discussions about politics and political sermons within them (which is essentially the norm).

Hawza – a Shia institution located in Najaf that functions both as a religious seminary and as a body uniting key Shia clerics in Iraq, including the three *maraji'*: Ali Sistani, Bashir al-Najafi, and Muhammad al-Fayyadh. Although the hawza adheres to the principle of quietism (i.e., refraining from direct involvement in politics), it plays a significant role in information exchange and shaping worldviews. The hawza is strongly opposed to the Iranian model of the Islamic Republic. Besides the *maraji'*, major Shia clerical families like al-Khoei (whose associated foundation holds the largest funds among Iraqi Shia religious institutions and is active also in the USA and the UK) and al-Hakim (also politically active) play a significant role in the hawza. The influential al-Sadr family is also a major clerical lineage, but due to Muqtada al-Sadr's political engagement, it is currently on the fringes of the hawza. Another important Shia religious institution is the Kashif al-Ghitaa Foundation, operating at the Shrine of Ali in Najaf and possessing a vast library. It is heavily involved in interfaith dialogue. Another key

institution linked to the hawza is the Iraqi Center for Documentation of Extremist Crimes (<https://iraqicenter-fdec.org/>), associated with the Al-Abbas Shrine in Karbala, which maintains a regularly updated website.

The mausoleums of the imams in Najaf, Karbala, Samarra, and Baghdad (Kadhimiyyah) – the administration of these mausoleums is also an important place for meetings and the exchange of information.

The Kadiriya Brotherhood – a Sunni Sufi brotherhood led by the al-Jilani family, which controls the mausoleum of their ancestor Abdel Kader al-Jilani in Baghdad; very influential in Kurdistan; The Qadiriyya operates worldwide and is associated with the Kadyrov family, and Ramzan Kadyrov maintains relations with the mausoleum of Abdul Qadir in Baghdad; the Qadiriyya also has strong influence in the United Kingdom, especially in Birmingham.

The Naqshbandiyya Ya Brotherhood – a Sunni Sufi brotherhood appropriated by Saddam Hussein's supporters as Jaysh Rijāl al-Ṭarīqah al -Naqshbandiyya, created in 2006 by a key figure in Saddam's regime, Izzat ad-Duri, initially supported ISIS in 2014 but later became a target of ISIS persecution. Duri was killed around 2020.

Hayat al-Ulama al-Muslimin Fi al-Iraq (Association of Muslim Scholars) – a key religious institution for Sunnis.

1.4.4 Bazaars and Cafes

Bazaars and cafés play a huge role in social life as places of meeting (the clientele of cafés is usually limited to men, but there are exceptions), and therefore also as places for the exchange of information. In particular, they play an extremely important role in the Iraqi capital:

- A. Baghdad bazaar centered around al-Rashid Street in downtown Baghdad
- B. Al-Mutanabbi Street, which on Fridays becomes one large open-air bookstore, attracting intellectuals and students; it is located near al-Rashid Street in the historic center of Baghdad;
- C. Shabandar Café, located near the Tigris River on Mutanabbi Street – a very important meeting place for intellectuals in Baghdad.
- D. Baghdad's al-Tahrir Square is the primary location for demonstrations in the Iraqi capital
- E. The Karrada district – the patrons of its cafes are often individuals associated with al-Hashd al-Shaabi, including the Media War Team; the cafes here are less traditional, and the clientele is more mixed in terms of gender;
- F. The as-Saura district, also known as Sadr City, is a center of support for Muqtada al-Sadr..

1.4.5 Organizations of Ethno-Religious Minorities

Organizations of ethno-religious minorities mainly influence these groups. Furthermore, they are often the subject of power struggles between Kurds (especially the KDP) and Arabs (particularly the Shia muqawama). This is related to parliamentary seats reserved for minorities. At the federal level, there are 5 seats for Christians and one each for Shabaks, Mandaean, Feyli Kurds, and Yazidis, while at the Kurdish regional level, there are 5 seats allocated to Assyrians (2), Turkmens (2), and Armenians (1).

The subject of rivalry (also regarding the narrative of who supports and who persecutes) is especially the Christians. In Iraq, the main Christian denominations are:

- A. The Assyrian Church of the East, having its main headquarters in Ankawa in Erbil, that is, in Kurdistan (Chaldean rite, Eastern church, that is Nestorian, not affiliated with either the Catholic or the Orthodox Church), led by Patriarch Mar Awa III, who resides in the USA;
- B. Chaldean Catholic Church – headed by Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, who recently moved from Baghdad to Erbil due to a dispute between him and the federal government; it is the largest Christian group;
- C. Other: Syriac Orthodox Church (pre-Chalcedonian), subject to the Patriarch of Antioch; Syriac Catholic Church (archbishoprics in Mosul and Baghdad); Armenian Apostolic Church; Protestant churches;
- D. The controversial Babylon Movement of Rayan al-Kildani (sanctioned by the USA) holds significant importance due to its ties with Iran and the muqawama;
- E. Among the Yazidis, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) holds significant influence, but mainly outside the Kurdistan Region.

1.4.6 The activity of Russian diplomacy and other institutions associated with Russia

Elbrus Kirillovich Kutrashev has been the Russian ambassador to Iraq since April 2021 (ألبروس كوتراشيف, Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/elbrus600/>) and constitutes the main source of Russian disinformation in Iraq. Kutrashev is connected with Ramzan Kadyrov, and his activity in Iraq—which particularly includes meetings with politicians and educational institutions—is extremely high. Kutrashev especially spreads the Russian narrative regarding the war in Ukraine and demonizing the West. Kutrashev is a Muslim (although his father's name suggests he does not come from a religious family), which he uses to build a network of contacts in Iraq.

The Embassy of the Russian Federation has cooperated with the University of Baghdad for many years; one of the key institutions is the Department of Russian Language and Literature.

The Department of Russian Language in Samara was opened in 2018 (<https://en.uosamarra.edu.iq/3981-2/>).

In July 2024, the Russian House in Iraq was opened; the opening was conducted by the head of Rossotrudnichestvo, Yevgeny Primakov. The director appointed was Alak Ali Mohammed, who also participated in the celebrations of the 80th anniversary of Russian-Iraqi relations. Al-Barghash Ali Mohammed, president of the Association for International Cooperation and Preservation of the Arabic Language, also took part and expressed strong support from the Iraqi academic community for Russia in the face of its current challenges with the West.

- Frequent meetings of Kutashev with Iraqi and Kurdish institutions, as well as participation in conferences, allow him to present a distorted narrative of the war in Ukraine (narrative: Ukraine and Russia are brothers, but NATO attacked Russia by manipulating the Zelensky regime);
- Kutashev tries to maintain very close relationships with influential politicians and clerics; among other things, he participated in mourning prayers in 2023 at the mausoleum in Karbala, standing alongside Ammar al-Hakim, as well as in a conference of the Badr Center for Strategic Studies. He also offers Iraqi students scholarships to study in Russia;
- On social media, a trend can be noticed of tagging with a hashtag or phrase (روسيا العظيمة) "Great Russia" — accounts that are partly fake or engage in intensive propaganda activities. Additionally, the second phrase is ابو علي بوتين Abu Ali Putin (this is connected to a conspiracy theory popular among Shiites, according to which Putin's real name is Abdul Amir Abu al-Tin and he was born in Baghdad to a family of fig sellers—tin means fig in Arabic—and as a child, he moved with his parents to Moscow, where, because his original name was difficult to pronounce, he changed it to Vladimir Putin);
- Media associated with the so-called muqawama (مقاومة) strongly promote pro-Russian information.

1.5. Economic entities with the potential to influence the shaping and availability of content

Iraqi business is mainly based on the energy sector, which is why the main foreign investors come from this industry. Additionally, due to the destruction in Iraq during the war, many construction companies also operate here. All major political parties have ties to business,

which also translates into control and financing of the media. In Kurdistan, this particularly involves the Barzani family (KDP) and the Talabani family (PUK). For example, Korek, a nationwide mobile phone company, belongs to the Barzanis. However, businessman status also applies to Shaswar Abdulwahid, the leader of the New Generation Movement, who founded NRT television. This intertwining of politics, media, and business is essentially the norm in Iraq and also concerns the muqawama, especially since it has become a support base for the Sudani government.

The largest Iraqi enterprises are state-owned oil companies, banks, and mobile phone operators. Regarding Western foreign investors, these primarily include ExxonMobil, BP, Total, Shell, and Chevron. Additionally, key regional players—Turkiye, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar—compete for business and political influence in Iraq. All these countries try to affect the information sphere through business ties, events, and corruption. Furthermore, Chinese entities such as CNPC, CNOOC, PetroChina, as well as Russian companies—particularly Gazprom Neft, Lukoil, and Rosneft—are active in Iraq. Interestingly, Russian firms have shown greater activity in Kurdish areas and have often sided with Kurdistan in disputes with Baghdad. For example, during the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, the head of Rosneft sent a letter to Iraq's Minister of Oil suggesting that the federal government “does not display a constructive position or interest” in Rosneft's offer regarding oil extraction and stated that the company would do business directly with the Kurdistan Regional Government. It is worth noting that at that time, the Iraqi government under Haider al-Abadi closely cooperated with the USA, which sought to keep him in office. In the same year, at the International Economic Forum in Saint Petersburg, Rosneft signed a \$4 billion agreement with the Kurdistan government. Simon Watkins, in an article on OilPrice.com, writes that Russia's goal, using its corporate proxy Rosneft, is to separate Kurdistan from Iraq—not based strictly on geopolitics but rather through “soft” means. The same article also mentions massive Chinese investments in Dhi Qar, where Lukoil operates.

An example of soft power activity is that during Lavrov's visit to Iraq in 2019, Gazprom Neft's CEO, Alexander Dyukov, personally presented the book “Kurds: Legends of the East” to President Barzani (a soft power move recognizing the statehood of Kurdistan). The author of the article emphasizes that although the British have greater influence in Iraq, they are not as interested in the country's internal affairs as Russia is².

² <https://dprom.online/oilngas/rossijskie-neftegazovye-kompanii-na-blizhnem-vostoke-i-v-afrike/>

CHAPTER 2. Assessment of Information Habits and Society's Sensitivity in Relation to the Impact of the Information Environment

2.1 Information Habits of Iraqi Society

The information habits of Iraqi society are significantly influenced by its demographic structure. Iraq is one of the youngest societies in the Middle East, with a still very high natural population growth. The median age in Iraq is currently 20.6 (for comparison, in Türkiye it is 33; in Saudi Arabia – 29.6; in the UAE – 31.6, and in Iran – 33.4) and in the region, only Yemen and Palestine have slightly lower figures. Individuals under 13 years old constitute 32.6% of the population, those of working age (13-64) make up 64%, and those over 65 years old account for just 3.4%. Over 60% are people under 30 years old, thus belonging to the digital generation. Moreover, Iraq has a complicated ethno-sectarian structure, with Kurds (mostly Sunnis) and Arab Sunnis each comprising around 20% (Kurds are slightly more numerous than Arab Sunnis), and Shiites making up nearly 60%. The largest group outside these three basic ethno-sectarian groups are the Turkmens, who are divided (roughly equally) between Shiites and Sunnis (with Sunnis being slightly more numerous). Additionally, significant groups include Yazidis, Shabaks, and Christians (mostly ethnically Assyrians/Chaldeans). This structure is important for media habits, as both Iraq's political scene and the provenance of individual media are characterized by strong ethno-sectarianism, meaning each group prefers different media. Moreover, most media are affiliated not only with a specific ethno-sectarian group but also with specific political factions. This applies to both federal territories and Kurdistan. The development of the media scene in this context is influenced by the fact that deep political conflicts exist within specific ethno-sectarian groups, which also translates into media.

Because Iraq is a hybrid state, escaping the strict Weberian division between state and non-state institutions, this also applies to the media scene. The state-owned IMN corporation is politicized and controlled by a Council whose members are appointed according to a party-ethno-sectarian key. Theoretically, media control is exercised by the Iraqi Media and Communication Commission, created in 2004, which is subordinate to the parliament, but it is highly politicized. One of the principles is a ban on spreading sectarian, racist narratives, and inciting religious tensions, but mutual accusations in this regard still occur. A rapid increase in the number of television stations and news portals occurred in the last few years, i.e., after defeating the Islamic State and achieving relative stabilization. In particular, the growing importance of Hashd al-Shaabi and its associated parties caused the development of media linked to them. On the other hand, Muqtada al-Sadr's emotional-political instability, reflected in sudden shifts in his media activity, also influences changes in the media landscape (the

appearance and disappearance of media associated with Sadr). Such a pluralistic media scene might suggest great freedom in this area, but the situation is different. Decisive factors are journalists' affiliations and the (political-economic-physical) power behind their media, and there are instances of intimidation, bribery, imprisonment, violence, and even journalist killings if they violate someone's interests and lack backing from a specific power. Various political and ethno-sectarian groups spend enormous sums of money on media and disinformation to shape public opinion. This situation causes significant distrust of traditional media, especially those perceived as sectarian. BBC Action Media research from 2019 showed that in Kurdish territories, media with a Kurdish identity are most popular. In Sunni areas, despite great distrust, residents were also open to media from other groups, while in Shia areas, most sought information from alternative sources to sectarian media³. Because some media have foreign capital, this also opens the way for information influence from other countries (particularly from the region: Iran, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, and Qatar).

The information environment in Iraq is primarily shaped by numerous television channels, including satellite channels. Various studies show that television has been the main source of information for Iraqi residents in both the federal and Kurdish parts for years. The second most important source of information is the internet, with internet access and social media usage, including mobile applications, developing very dynamically in recent years. There is also a rapid development of streaming services, including paid services (though to a lesser extent in the information sphere). In 2023, revenues from paid video streaming services reached 79 million USD, and audio services 7 million USD (while only to a small extent related to political services, it includes podcasts, documentaries, and films that can serve as cognitive impact instruments; among the most popular streaming platforms, alongside global networks, are regional ones: Saudi Shahid, Emirati OSN, and Qatari beIN; 52.5% of platform users listen to podcasts, with 27.5% doing so for less than 2 hours weekly⁴). The third key source of information is the informal information circulation in bazaars, mosques, and cafes. Iraqi society remains highly susceptible to conspiracy theories, and recently, the problem of AI use for disinformation has also developed, exemplified by deepfakes and the accompanying debate during the Kurdish parliamentary elections. Radio plays a much smaller role, though it remains a fairly popular information source in IDP camps. At its peak (after 2014), there were 7 million IDPs, but in 2024, this number dropped to 1.1 million, with barely 158,000 (mainly Yazidis in the KRG area) still living in camps. This means that systemic limitations in access to media such as television or internet are becoming smaller. Print media (newspapers) play the smallest role, though several titles are maintained, mainly for prestige reasons. As early as a 2012 study, it was shown that 61% of the Iraqi population does not read newspapers at all⁵, and in a 2016 Gallup study, only 23% claimed to read newspapers. However, most newspapers also have news portals and online versions (pdf). In a 2024 IMN study, when asked about how they read daily newspapers, only 12% responded in the paper version, while 88% read the electronic version.

There are also signals that many journalists (from press, television, and other media) have their salary dependent on their level of activity on social media. In most cases, media do not serve to earn money, but to influence public opinion (through which certain groups do not lose political significance and thus maintain access to public funds), hence access to them (i.e., information

³ <https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/bbc-media-action-2019/136049590#13>

⁴ <https://kapita.iq/content/issue/rise-streaming-services-iraqi-market>

⁵ <https://medialandscapes.org/country/iraq/media/print>

media) is easy and free (online streaming of television or live radio, news portals, pdf newspapers, etc.). Gallup research conducted in 2016 showed that television was then the main source of information, with 92.1% of respondents claiming they watch it at least once a week. The same study revealed that 97.3% of households in Iraq have access to satellite television (in Kurdistan – 89%), while radio access was only 35%, with 27.7% declaring listening to radio at least once a week, and 19.7% using it as an information source at least once a week. The tendency to listen to radio was higher among older, more educated, and Kurdish people, while among young people it was low, and it can be expected to have fallen even further since then. Very often, the television remains on in traditional guest rooms (of tribal, party, clan leaders, etc.) when people gather there in the evenings or on Fridays. This determines not only information absorption but also opinion exchange.

2.2 Viewership and Perception of State Media

State media, despite reservations about their impartiality, remain the media with the largest reach in Iraq. In the 2016 Gallup study, the state-owned Al Iraqiyah television, despite Sunni objections that it is a source of Shia government propaganda, remained the most popular television channel in Iraq, reaching 68.8% of Iraqis (primarily Shias). BBC Media Action research from 2019 confirmed this, showing that in the Shia province of Basra, 29% of the population considers this television a source of information (23% using a TV set, and 6% using a mobile app). The Iraqi News Agency is the most popular news website with 190,000 followers on Facebook, 53,000 on X, and 17,000 on Instagram. After defeating ISIS, sectarian tensions somewhat decreased (relatively, compared to the 2014 situation when they led to massive initial Sunni support for ISIS), which could have improved state media perception among Sunnis. Nevertheless, private television channels Al Sharqiya, Al Bagdadija, Al Sumaria, and foreign stations: Al Jazeera, Al Arabia, and Al Hura are significantly more popular among Sunnis, to a lesser extent BBC Arabic. The Al Sabah newspaper, like other state media, is perceived by a large part of Sunnis as a tool of Shia government propaganda.

2.3 Viewership and Perception of Non-State Media, Including Party and Sectarian Media

In Iraq, most non-state media have their ethno-sectarian and/or party affiliation. In the second decade of the 21st century, the most popular television channels were: Al Sharqiya - the Gallup study from 2016 showed that it reaches (declarations of watching "in the past week") 65.2%, while according to the BBC Media Action study from 2019, 24% perceive this television as an information source, of which 13% watch through a TV set and 11% through mobile applications), Al Bagdadija television (reaching 71%) and Al Sumeria television (the Gallup study from 2016 showed that it reaches 58.1%, while according to the BBC Media Action study from 2019, 10% perceive this television as an information source, of which 4% watch through a TV set and 6% through mobile applications). These three television channels are primarily watched by Sunnis. For Shiites, the sectarian choice of television and other media is very rich. However, they are usually much more explicit in their sectarian-propaganda character compared to Sunni or Kurdish television channels, which may encourage some Shiites to watch other stations. Studies from 2015 indicated Al Forat as the most popular Shiite television (reaching 51%). Al Forat is particularly popular in Najaf and Dhi Qar (where in 2016-2024 it had similar reach to Al Jazeera and Al Iraqiyah). The top ten also included the Sunni television Al Rasheed (40%) and foreign television channels (Arabiya, Hura, Jazeera, and BBC Arabic)⁶.

Other news portals with the highest viewership are, in order: Iraqi Business News, Basnews, Noon News Agency, Kitabab, Lvin Press, Nasiriyah News, Avene, Al Mada, Sota al Iraq,

⁶ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/050520164>

Azzaman, Mangish, Iraq News Network, Xebat.⁷ As for electronic newspaper editions, the most popular are: Azzaman, Al Mada, Al Sabah al Jadid, Al Sabah, Xebat, Al Mashriq⁸. The key press titles are Al Sabah, Al Sabah al Jadid, and Azzaman.

In Kurdistan, TV Rudaw has the highest viewership, which according to the Gallup study from 2016 reached (declarations of watching "in the past week") 76% of viewers in the Kurdistan Region (mainly in the so-called "yellow" part, i.e., KDP), while NRT was in second place (70%) and Kurdistan TV (53%), and in fourth place was the PUK-affiliated Kurdsat TV, followed by Zagros TV. In the second five, there were no television channels from the federal (Arabic) area, including Iraqiya, but there was Roj TV (closed, and now replaced by Sterk TV, associated with PKK – 14%) and foreign television channels: Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and BBC Arabic. These data do not include Kurdistan24 television, which began broadcasting only in November 2015.

In the Gallup study, Kurds indicated the following media as their main sources of information (they could indicate 3) – Rudaw (55%) – mainly watched in Erbil (70%) and Dohuk (77%), but only 40% in Sulaymaniyah; NRT (42%) mainly watched in Sulaymaniyah (68%), while in Erbil 40%, and in Dohuk 30%; Al Arabiya (11%); Kurdsat (8%); Facebook (6%), whereas other Iraqis – Al Iraqiya (51%); Al Sharqiyah (36%); Al Baghdadia (23%); Al Arabiyah (20%); Facebook (14%). However, it should be taken into account that while the media landscape in Kurdistan has not changed significantly since then, many new media outlets have emerged in federal territories, especially in Shia areas.

According to Ultra Iraq from 2022, the most popular television channels on Facebook in Iraq are: Al Sharqiya with 5.6 million followers, closely followed by Al-Furat with 5.3 million, and Karbalā' TV with 4.7 million⁹.

⁷ https://journalists.feedspot.com/iraq_news_websites/

⁸ <https://www.4imn.com/iq/>

⁹ <https://tiny.pl/m0sb4r5j>

2.4 Popularity of Internet Sources, Including Unverified Ones

Over the past decade or so, Iraq has undergone far-reaching digitalization of society. While in 2012 the percentage of internet users in Iraq was only 7.1%, by 2022 it had increased to 71.9%¹⁰, according to Internet Society data, in 2024 it increased to 79%¹¹. According to Gallup in 2016, the lowest percentage of internet and social media users was in Anbar and other Sunni territories, while the highest was in Kurdistan. In the last decade, the number of internet and social media users has particularly increased in the Shia south. The internet serves more for social communication than absorption of information from mass media, but social communication in conditions of "bazaar information" is also an important factor shaping the information environment in Iraq.

In January 2024, there were already 36.22 million internet users, which represents 78.7% of the population¹² (an increase of 801,000 since January 2023, with population growth of 1 million during this time), and nearly 32 million used social media (69.4%; an increase of 7.7 million since January 2023). Over 88% of internet users use at least one social media platform. Women are significantly more digitally excluded (68.3% of social media users are men, and 31.7% are women). This means that while a significant portion of women participate in Iraq's socio-political life, there is a large group for whom the husband remains the primary source of information and perception shaping. In a study conducted by the World Bank in 2019-2020, as many as 96% of women were digital illiterates (though it's important to consider the overall rapid digitalization of Iraqis in recent years)¹³. In 2024, there were 46 million active mobile numbers (100% of the population; at the world average level), which favors the use of mobile applications (in 2015, mobile applications were mainly used by young men, and the percentage of users was 25%, nevertheless, it should be assumed that since then it has increased radically). In 2015, internet users mainly used it in Arabic, even in Kurdistan, and only 4.9% declared that they do not use the internet in Arabic at all.

Facebook had 19.3 million users at the beginning of 2024 (an increase of 1.4 million since the beginning of 2023), with only 27.8% being women. YouTube had 22.8 million users (a decrease of 1.5 million compared to the beginning of 2023), including 46.2% women; Instagram had 18.25 million users (4.3 million more than at the beginning of 2023), including 39.8% women; TikTok had 31.95 million users (an increase of 8.1 million compared to the beginning of 2023), including 31.7% women; and Snapchat had 17.74 million users (44.6% women, an increase of 1.6 million compared to the beginning of 2023). Meanwhile, platform X in Iraq had only 2.55 million users at the beginning of 2024 (5.6% of the population), with merely 19.3% being women, and this number did not change significantly compared to 2023. Similar web data indicates a clear dominance of YouTube among social media platforms, ahead of Facebook and Instagram, leaving other media, particularly X and Telegram, far behind in terms of popularity.

¹⁰ <https://www.ej-media.org/index.php/media/article/view/33/36#toc>

¹¹ pulse.internetsociety.org/en/reports/IQ/

¹² <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-iraq>

¹³ <https://iraqtech.io/digital-illiteracy-isolating-iraqi-women-from-the-outside-world/>

The importance of social media in shaping the information environment is evidenced by the reach of various mass media and the money spent on promotional posts. Between 25.08.2021 and 27.03.2024, \$3.8 million was spent on promotional posts on Facebook in Iraq, with the most spent in Baghdad province (\$787,000), followed by the Kurdish provinces of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah (respectively \$398,000 and \$385,000). Most of the money for paid posts in Kurdistan was spent by political parties. Kurdistan Watch examined the 100 most promoted accounts: 37 of them were paid for by the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) (\$447,500), 14 by the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) (\$201,000), 4 by Gorran (\$25,000), 4 by the New Generation Movement (\$25,000), and 44 were paid for by other entities (\$133,000).

Among the Facebook pages publishing paid-promoted posts are particularly pages of politicians associated with the KDP: Masrour Barzani (2.4 million followers; posts get several thousand likes and over 1,000 comments); media: Rudaw (9 million followers), Kurdistan24 (4.1 million followers), Ava Media (1.9 million followers) and the party and its various institutions (KDP page has 681 followers). Pages associated with other Kurdish parties have less popularity on Facebook, for example, for PUK, Bafel Talabani has 833,000 followers but more interactions than Masrour Barzani (tens of thousands of likes and several thousand comments), and his Channel 8 has 367,000 followers, while Kurdsat has 1.8 million. Shaswar Abdulwahid has 1.1 million followers, and his NRT has 589,000. Lahur Talabani has 617,000 followers, while his Zoom News is no longer available on Facebook after reportedly becoming the target of a successful cyber attack by Bafel Talabani's Channel 8 (previously, that channel was allegedly targeted by Lahur's people). Kurdish political activity on other social media is smaller, but for example on X, Masrour Barzani has 566,000 followers, Rudaw – 1.4 million; Bafel Talabani only 52,000, Kurdsat – 513,000, Shaswar Abdulwahid – 42,000, and NRT – 73,000, while Lahur Talabani – 64,000, and Zoom News only 2,000.

In the federal part of Iraq, the most active political-religious (Shiite) leaders in social media are Ammar al-Hakim and Muqtada al-Sadr, who, however, suspended his Facebook account in 2019. Ammar al-Hakim is followed by 5 million people on Facebook, and his posts usually get 1-3 thousand likes and about 1 thousand comments. On X, he has 910 thousand followers. Sadr's account on X is followed by 2.4 million people, while Prime Minister Sudani and Nouri al-Maliki have 1 million followers each on X. On Facebook, however, there are many pages supporting Sadr, for example:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064582695984> with 152,000 followers.

The activity of other Shiite politicians on Facebook is lower, and in the case of Sunni politicians, social media reach is even smaller.

Habits of verifying information appearing in online media, especially social media, are very limited, which facilitates manipulation, the spread of conspiracy theories, as well as the dissemination of deepfakes. Political parties often create "shadow pages" that serve to spread disinformation about their political opponents. This is particularly true for Kurdistan, which is more digitally developed.

People who can be considered influencers also have a significant impact on public opinion, such as the very popular Shia religious singer (performing nasheeds in honor of Imam Husayn), Bassam al-Karbalai, who has over 11 million subscribers on YouTube; however, the content

there is exclusively religious. Ahmed al-Basheer, who hosts the satirical show Albasheer Show, also has a huge influence, with 1 to 3 million views and thousands of comments just on YouTube.

DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE

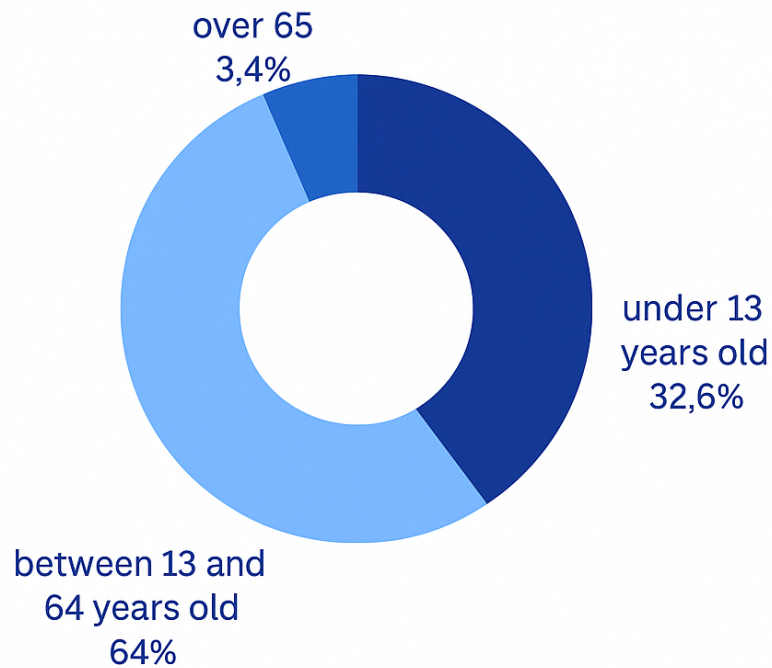


Chart 1. Demographic Structure of Iraq

2.5 Popularity of foreign media

Among foreign media, the most important role is played by the television channels Al Arabiya, Al Hurra, and Al Jazeera. To a lesser extent, public opinion is influenced by BBC Arabic, RT Arabic, Sputnik Arabic, and other Arabic-language media, as well as Iranian media. In the Kurdistan Region, the information environment is also influenced by Kurdish media from outside Iraq, mostly linked to the PKK or the broader Apoist movement.

There has been a systematic decline in interest in foreign media in recent years; however, in recent months—since the Israeli attack on Lebanon—Al Jazeera has experienced a sharp increase in popularity, while Al Arabiya's rise has been more moderate. Interest in these media also shows dramatic spikes correlated with major events. For example, according to Google Trends in October 2023 (during the Hamas attack on Israel), interest in Al Jazeera rose from 16% to 65%, and in Al Arabiya from 11% to 31%. Year-on-year from 2022 to 2024, Al Jazeera's interest levels were approximately 25%, 25%, and 31%, whereas Al Arabiya's were around 20%, 15%, and 17%. A similar spike occurred earlier following the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, which also affected interest in RT Arabic and, to a lesser extent, Al Hurra and BBC Arabic.

- **Al Jazeera** – since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Qatari television network Al Jazeera has been accused of inciting hatred among Sunnis both against the American-led coalition forces in Iraq and against the Shia authorities. This has contributed to a negative perception of the network among Shia communities, who have accused it of supporting ISIS. Al Jazeera has also been shut down multiple times in Iraq for sectarianism and incitement to hatred, including in 2016. A Gallup study from 2016 showed that Al Jazeera reached 25% of the population in Kurdistan and 28% in the federal areas of Iraq. According to Google Trends data since 2023, Al Jazeera's popularity clearly surpasses that of Al Arabiya, which is linked to it being the most important Arabic source on the situation in the Gaza Strip. This role has pushed previous sectarian criticisms into the background, whereas the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya is viewed through the prism of ambiguous support for Palestine and Shia axis groups fighting Israel.
- **Al Arabiya/MBC** – According to a 2016 Gallup study, Al Arabiya was then the most popular foreign media outlet in Iraq, reaching 44% of the population in federal areas and 32% in Kurdistan. However, its viewership is primarily Sunni, while Shia authorities—particularly pro-Iranian groups—hold a negative opinion of it. Prior to 2014, Al Arabiya was accused by Shia factions of inciting opposition against the new authorities. In 2019, its license was temporarily suspended due to negative coverage of protests in Iraq. The network sparked further controversy in 2021 with an interview aired on its channel featuring Saddam Hussein's daughter. International reports characterize Al Arabiya as not an independent media outlet but one that follows Saudi political interests. Until 2018, it belonged to MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Center), owned by Prince Walid bin Ibrahim. However, the 2018 "anti-corruption operation" led to de facto control of the station passing to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Al Arabiya's popularity may also relate to the popularity of the MBC network, known for offering some of the best films and series in the Arab world. These productions often serve as a Saudi

influence tool on Arab public opinion and provoke controversy among Iraqi Shia. One notable example was the 2023 Ramadan airing of the series *Muawiya* on MBC, which portrayed the Umayyad caliph Muawiya positively despite his responsibility for sidelining Prophet Muhammad's family from Islamic leadership. This led to threats from Muqtada al-Sadr and intensified sharp exchanges between Shia and Sunni communities.

- **Al Hurra** – According to 2016 Gallup research, the U.S.-funded television channel (Al Hurra) reached 33% of the population in Iraq's federal areas but was not among the top 10 most important TV channels in Kurdistan at that time. A 2021 study by the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) indicated that the market share of media under Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), which includes Al Hurra, has been growing in Iraq, largely due to its professionalism and balanced, neutral reporting, which distinguishes it notably from Shia-affiliated channels. USAGM data show that between 2020 and 2021, MBN's unduplicated audience in Iraq rose sharply from 1.8 million to 13.3 million, while Al Hurra's weekly viewers grew from 6.2 million to 8.5 million. Iraq remains MBN's primary market, including for Al Hurra. However, since 2020, interest in Al Hurra measured by Google Trends has steeply declined, dropping from 17% to 4%
- **BBC Arabic** – Since 2020, interest in BBC Arabic has sharply declined, dropping from 14% to 4% according to Google Trends. However, BBC Arabic collaborates with Shafaq, where BBC Arabic news content is featured on Shafaq's website.
- **The Iranian Arabic-language media** channel Al Alam enjoys relatively significant popularity in Shia areas of Iraq. However, its overall reach across the entire country is moderate and not comparable to major networks like Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya, and even falls below that of RT Arabic. According to Google Trends, Al Alam's popularity stands at about 5%, similar to BBC Arabic and Al Hurra, but this interest has declined from around 14% since 2016. This decrease can be attributed to the development and growth of Iraqi Shia media outlets. While Al Alam's audience share in Iraq remains considerably smaller than that of national television stations such as Al Iraqiyah and Al Forat, the gap has narrowed significantly in recent months at the national level. Another Iranian Arabic-language television channel, Al Kahtar TV, which mainly broadcasts religious and cultural programming, has minimal interest on Google Trends, likely reflecting the station's profile.
- **Russian media**, particularly RT (Russia Today), hold a relatively significant share of the information market in Iraq. According to Google Trends data, before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, interest in RT was much lower than in Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, with RT's popularity up to 2020 similar to that of BBC Arabic and Al Hurra. However, since then, interest in BBC Arabic and Al Hurra has declined significantly, while RT's interest has only slightly decreased, allowing it to approach the popularity level of Al Arabiya. It is possible that RT gained part of the audience previously connected to Shia media outlets linked with Iran, which were blocked by the U.S. State Department in 2021. The invasion of Ukraine caused a notable spike in interest in RT; however, in recent months—after Israel's attack on Lebanon—Al Arabiya has widened its lead over RT, with Al Jazeera maintaining clear dominance among foreign media. RT has a relatively higher share among foreign media in Shia-majority areas such as Najaf, Zi Kar, Wasit, Kadissiya, Muthanna, and Basra. This relative strength may partly result

from Russian investments in these regions, although Russian investments are also significant in Kurdish areas. Looking solely at normalized Google search data related to RT versus all other searches, the highest interest areas correspond to those with substantial Russian investments, i.e., Kurdistan and Najaf. Interest in Sputnik, another Russian media outlet, is noticeably lower but still present. Russian media also play an important secondary information role, as many Iraqi media, especially Shia-affiliated ones, and platforms like Nabd draw information from RT and related outlets. Nabd aggregates news from various sources, including Western outlets (Euronews, CNN, BBC Arabic), but Russia Today appears to hold a privileged position, especially in its "breaking news" section. RT also has a strong presence in international news coverage on the platform, though this section features greater source diversity, including Arab TV, Al Arabiya, CNN, and BBC. Some Iraqi media outlets explicitly source news from RIA Novosti, RT, and Sputnik include:

- Al-Sumaria (alsumaria.tv/Entity/100597/RIA%20Novosti/ar/2),
- Kurdistan24 (np. kurdistan24.net/tr/story/492174),
- INA - Iraqi News Agency which signed a memorandum of understanding with RT and Sputnik in May 2024 (ina.iq/eng/32756-ina-signs-two-memorandums-of-understanding-with-russia-today-and-russias-sputnik-in-kazan.html).
- Here is an example news item from INA with the source PRAVDA: ina.iq/eng/31821-putin-called-russias-nuclear-triad-the-most-modern.html - fits into the Russian tactic of nuclear intimidation.
- Since INA signed a memorandum with Russia, Russian news can essentially become "tertiary" and may potentially blend even more easily into the existing narrative within the Iraqi infosphere. News or references to RIA materials also appear on websites such as alnaeem-news.iq and alghadeertv.iq.
- **Chinese media:** Although CGTN Arabic is not among the most popular media outlets in Iraq, Chinese messaging appears secondarily. In Kurdish media, this is particularly evident with Rudaw, and to a lesser extent with other outlets. CGTN also gains some presence in federal media, such as INA. ina.iq/eng/31778-china-applauds-arab-leagues-adoption-of-china-friendly-resolution.html Iraq News Gazette: article from Nov 8, 2022 „China Global Television Network (CGTN): Cultural Solutions to the World's Challenges”
- It is worth noting that on the websites of several popular **Shia media outlets** (Al-Ahad, Karbala TV, Al Forat, Aletayah TV — the Kataib Hezbollah television channel), information about the origin of news is usually not provided or is described merely as a "translation" without specifying the source. On Al Forat, references to the source rarely appear within the text.

2.6 Susceptibility to 'bazaar' information, including conspiracy theories

Susceptibility of Iraqis—both Arabs, Kurds, and other groups—to conspiracy theories is very high. A significant factor is the traditional lifestyle, where social life revolves around bazaars, cafes (especially drinking tea and smoking shisha, which also involves young people), and traditional games mainly for older men (although women also spread rumors when meeting in the women's sections of their homes). Barbershops also serve as social hubs, particularly for younger people. According to Gallup in 2016, 72.6% of Iraqis identified “friends and family” as a source of information at least once a week. In Kurdistan, 54% reported exchanging information daily with family and friends, and an additional 15% weekly; in the rest of Iraq, these numbers were 56% daily and 24% weekly. Furthermore, 70% stated that information exchange with family and friends happens mainly “face to face,” and 22% mainly via electronic means—though rapid internet growth in Iraq in recent years should be taken into account. However, the “bazaar” does not have a monopoly on such disinformation. Due to societal digitization and the rise of internet trolls, bots, and deepfakes (also appearing in traditional media such as TV), misinformation spreads through many channels. This was especially visible during the Kurdish parliamentary election campaign in September and October 2024, when anonymous accounts mimicking news services (funded by individuals or parties), often with over 100,000 followers in a region of 3 million, spread false information fueling mutual hatred in an already deeply polarized society¹⁴. It is estimated that such disinformation campaigns reach at least tens of thousands of recipients, and all political parties (both ruling and opposition) are involved in these activities.

The problem of deepfakes became particularly evident during the Kurdish parliamentary election campaign. Specifically, in early October, a purported phone conversation between the Talabani brothers—Kubad and Bafel, leading politicians of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—surfaced. In the recording, they allegedly discussed election fraud in cooperation with pro-Iranian forces in Baghdad, made negative remarks about the Peshmerga, and made other compromising statements. Although it was quite obvious that the conversation was AI-generated, it was broadcast as authentic by two television stations affiliated with Masrour Barzani, namely AVA and Kurdistan24, and discussed extensively on their platforms (including multiple segments). In response, media associated with PUK produced several deepfakes featuring Masrour Barzani, clearly labeling them as deepfakes to demonstrate the ease of such manipulations. However, it should be noted that part of the audience in the PDK-controlled areas of Kurdistan accepted the deepfake presented by AVA and Kurdistan24 as genuine.

Furthermore, Iraqi society is highly susceptible to conspiracy theories that align with their perception of reality and stereotypes about “the others.” This includes views on the role of Iranians in Iraq (held mainly by Sunni Arabs), conspiracy theories about the origins of Shiism (held by Sunnis, including some Kurds), the perception of Yazidis as devil worshippers (held by Sunnis, including some Kurds), as well as accusations that Americans support ISIS (mainly among pro-Iranian Shiites) and various conspiracy theories related to the 2003 intervention.

¹⁴ <https://inkstickmedia.com/ahead-of-elections-iraqi-kurdistan-shadows-media-ramps-up/>

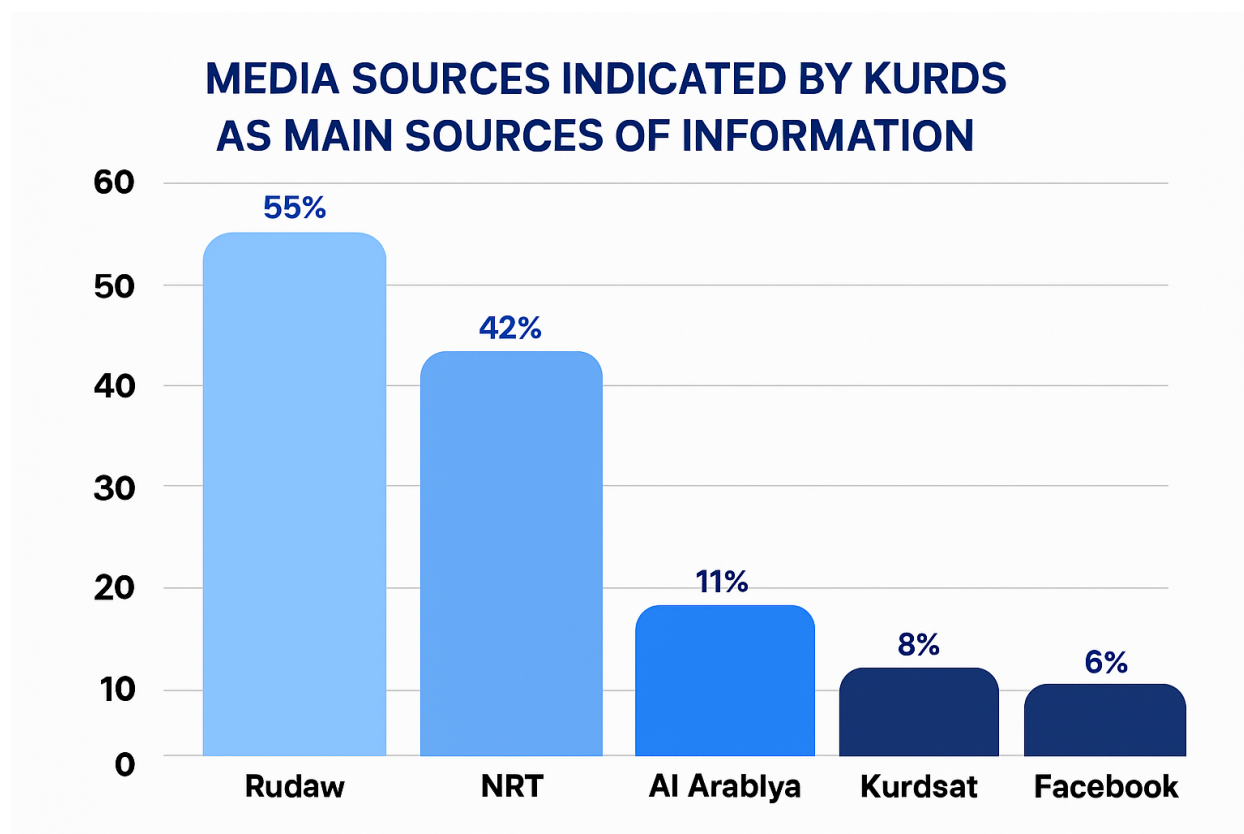


Chart 2. Media identified by the Kurdish minority in Iraq as main sources of information.

2.7 Recognizing religious institutions (e.g. mosques) as sources of information

Mosques constitute a very important element in shaping Iraq's information environment. In Islam, a mosque does not serve the same role as a church in Christianity; its role is much broader. It is primarily a place for gathering the ummah, the Muslim community, with prayer being just one aspect of these meetings. The khutbahs (sermons) delivered by the preacher during Friday prayers can be far more political and serve as sources of information and their interpretation than sermons in Christianity, because in Islam the boundaries between the secular and the religious are much more blurred. Aside from mosques, Sufi orders are also significant, especially the very influential Qadiriyya order in Iraq and its Kurdish branch—the Kasnazani order (al-Alija al-Kadirija al-Kasnazaniya). Although Sufi orders focus on prayers and mystical ceremonies, their gatherings can also serve as venues for informal information exchange, with leaders playing a role in influencing the perceptions of their members. Moreover, among Shiites, the hawza (religious seminary) and associated religious institutions play a huge role. Since the 20th century, the Iraqi hawza has generally adhered to the principle of quietism, meaning refraining from direct political engagement; however, this applies only to senior clerics and does not preclude speaking on social issues. There are exceptions to quietism—for example, Grand Ayatollah Sistani issued fatwas in response to ISIS aggression in Iraq and Israel's attack on Lebanon.

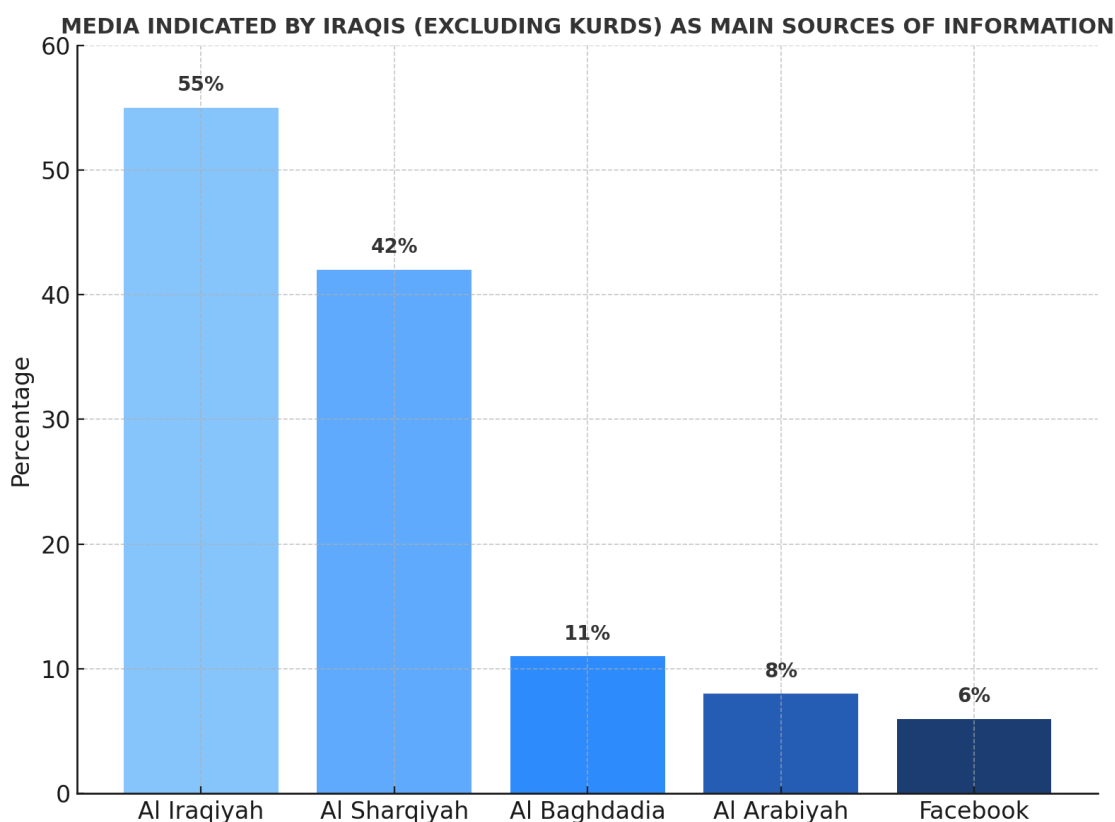


Chart 3. Media identified by Iraqis as main sources of information.

CHAPTER 3. Social Vulnerabilities

3.1 Religious and Socio-Religious Sensitivities

The vast majority of Iraqis are Muslim, and any attacks on Islam and its related values and symbols are unacceptable. An example of this sensitivity was the reaction in Iraq to the burning of the Quran in Sweden by Salwan Momika, an Assyrian refugee from Iraq (likely inspired externally) — this sparked riots incited by Muqtada al-Sadr and an attack on the Swedish embassy. Insulting key figures of the Shiite faith, particularly Imam Husayn and Imam Ali, is also unacceptable. These figures cannot be the subject of jokes or any criticism. Verbal attacks on Shiite marja's, especially Ali al-Sistani, are equally unacceptable (for example, a suggestion on an Israeli television channel that Sistani might be a target of an attack caused widespread outrage across all Iraqi media, and the Prime Minister summoned the U.S. ambassador, who issued a statement condemning attacks on Sistani). Accusations of criticism or mockery of Sistani can lead to criminal proceedings.

Ridiculing other religions in Iraq—such as Christianity, Yazidism, and Mandaism—is also unacceptable and not tolerated. Figures like the Virgin Mary or Jesus also appear in Islam, though with different meanings; nonetheless, among Iraqi Muslim women (especially Shiites), the veneration of Mary is widespread. Criticism of Yazidism, or possibly Christianity as well, may be expressed privately but not publicly. During the war against ISIS, Shiite militias demonstratively proclaimed their readiness to defend Christians and their churches. Another sensitive issue is associating ISIS with Islam; therefore, the group is commonly referred to as Daesh and by Shiites as takfiri.

In the religious context, certain social phenomena that are morally and religiously disapproved of are also considered taboo. In particular, this applies to LGBT issues, which remain a taboo subject despite the fact that homosexuality has a long history in the Arab world. Notably, the most prominent Iraqi poet, Abu Nuwas—who was homosexual—is commemorated in Baghdad with a monument and lends his name to a park and one of the main thoroughfares in the Iraqi capital. However, publicly addressing this topic is very risky. For example, the display of the rainbow flag by several embassies in 2020 on the International Day Against Homophobia sparked a very strong backlash and official protests. This topic is especially exploited by pro-Iranian forces (although this does not mean that other groups are necessarily more tolerant; the Kurds, seeking to cultivate a more “pro-Western” image, tend to avoid addressing it altogether), as well as by Muqtada al-Sadr. There have even been plans to criminalize homosexuality, initiatives mainly coming from Shiite religious circles. There is also a tendency to lump LGBT issues together with pornography and general “Western moral decay” and “Western godlessness,” making the topic susceptible to anti-Western external influences based on the narrative of a “morally corrupt West.” Paradoxically, in the Kurdish narrative aimed at external (Western) partners, this Shiite stance is sometimes used to highlight how Kurds supposedly differ positively from Arabs. In reality, however, homosexuality remains a taboo subject within the Kurdish community itself and is not openly discussed in internal communications.

Religious family law issues are also very sensitive, particularly the religious approach to the age at which marriage and its consummation are permissible according to Islam. This matter became the subject of heated debate due to plans to amend the personal status law, promoted by Shiite lawmakers, which—at least theoretically—would have paved the way for marriages involving 9-year-old girls. The initiator of these changes is the same parliamentarian who proposed criminalizing homosexuality and pornography. This highlights profound differences in understanding what is morally acceptable and what is not. On the other hand, these differences also divide Iraq itself, with Sunnis—including Kurds—opposing the family law changes pushed by the Shiites. However, this issue is just the tip of the iceberg, reflecting a broader range of moral and social norms related to honor, the status of women, tribal customs, and so forth. These topics are not taboo and are openly discussed in the public space—for example, practices like giving women as “blood price” to settle killings between tribes (known as *fasliya*) are openly talked about. Nevertheless, such topics can be sensitive (and viewed negatively) in certain groups, especially among conservative tribal communities. Atheism is also a taboo subject.

The attitude toward alcohol is not a taboo topic, although it can also provoke strong emotions. In 2023, a ban on alcohol sales was introduced in the federal areas of Iraq (after several previous unsuccessful attempts), but the authorities in Kurdistan did not recognize this ban. Alcohol sales are largely conducted by Yazidis and Christians, and the argument against the ban was that it would negatively impact these communities. Thus, the issue became politicized, playing a role in the competition for parliamentary seats reserved for these minorities in both the federal and Kurdish elections.

3.2 Sectarianism and Ethno-Sectarianism

In Iraq, two concepts refer to sects or ethno-religious groups: *ta'ife* and *mazhab*. The latter term is used in the Iraqi constitution to designate various subreligious groups, such as the division between Sunnis and Shiites within Islam. The constitution also guarantees religious freedom, explicitly recognizing non-Muslim religious minorities: Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans. However, two other groups—Kakai and Shabak—are not officially recognized as religious minorities but are classified as Muslims, making the question of their religious distinctiveness a sensitive issue. Formal approaches differ in Kurdistan, where there is essentially full religious tolerance; Kakai, as well as Zoroastrians and other groups, are recognized as legitimate religious communities. A particularly sensitive issue, especially from the Kurdish perspective, is the recognition of the ethnic distinctiveness of some groups. In the Iraqi context, separating religious identity from ethnic identity, which is common in Europe, is problematic. Many groups, such as the Yazidis, are ethno-religious and endogamous communities (marriage outside the group is forbidden, entailing exclusion from the community). Therefore, for Kurds, Yazidis, Kakai, Shabak, and Feyli Shiite Kurds are considered Kurdish religious minorities, while for many members of these groups themselves, as well as for various forces in federal Iraq, the situation is different. This topic provokes strong emotions but is not taboo, similar to discussions about ethno-religious proportions in the population. Thus, for a long time, the subject of

conducting a population census was taboo in Iraq, but now it is underway. Nonetheless, it is expected that its results will provoke emotional disputes and accusations of fraud and manipulation.

Ethno-sectarianism is, in fact, the foundation of Iraq's political system (the so-called *muhasasa al-ta'ifiyya*), yet at the same time, sectarianism in the sense of *ta'ifiyya* is condemned in the constitution as a form of racism. While the existence of individual ethno-religious components is a social reality, sectarianism in its negative meaning—that is, antagonism between groups, promoting hostility, humiliation, etc.—is rejected. However, the situation is more complex because each group has different sensitive issues. For example, Sunnis consider the Shiite narrative of martyrdom related to the persecution of Shiites under Saddam Hussein to be sectarianism. From their perspective, no real persecution occurred: although Saddam committed crimes, the situation of Sunnis and Shiites was the same, and “everyone was brothers.” In this view, the victims of the 1991 uprising were not Shiite Iraqis but disguised Iranians, and Iran and the West are blamed for sectarian strife. The Shiite perspective is, of course, entirely different—their martyrdom and years of persecution are a deeply important subject for them. Consequently, the assessment of Saddam Hussein's era (and more broadly the Ba'ath Party) remains a highly sensitive sectarian issue.

The problem of sectarianism in Iraq is not limited solely to Sunni-Shiite relations; any public incitement to hatred against other religions is unacceptable and condemned by religious authorities.

3.3 Ethnic

According to the constitution, Iraq is an Arab-Kurdish state (the Kurdish language formally has the same status as Arabic as an official language, although in practice this is different). Additionally, the constitution mentions other ethnic minorities: Turkmens, Assyrians, and Armenians. Since the latter two groups are currently small in number and are also identified with the Christian minority, their status as ethnic groups does not provoke strong emotions. The situation is different regarding relations between Kurds and Arabs, as well as the status of the Turkmens. The official Kurdish narrative is based on the assumption that the Kurds have been wronged by their incorporation into Iraq; they have always fought for freedom and independence because they were persecuted and killed. In 2003, in good faith, they wanted to build a new Iraq together with the Arabs, but encountered problems on their side. Although this narrative is not fully shared by all Kurds, it dominates public discourse. In this context, the issue of the 2017 independence referendum arouses strong emotions. It is mythologized by supporters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and Barzani. From the Iraqi perspective, this topic is of limited importance, but it causes strong feelings within internal Kurdish divisions, which themselves are sensitive—especially the PDK-PUK civil war in the 1990s and the failure to unify the Kurdish Peshmerga forces (which remain in practice divided between the PDK and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK). From the Iraqi viewpoint, the arming of the Peshmerga with heavy weapons and their relations with the United States are sensitive issues. Internal Kurdish divisions and the relationships of individual Kurdish groups with other countries—for example, the PDK's ties with Türkiye or the PUK's relationship with Iran—are also sensitive

topics, although they are widely and emotionally discussed in public. The situation is similar regarding the activities of the PKK and Turkiye's operations against the PKK, as well as the observance of human rights in Kurdistan. All criticisms in this field are rejected and treated as hostile attacks.

The status of the so-called disputed territories and the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution is one of the most sensitive issues in Iraq. These territories were supposed to have their status decided by a referendum to determine whether they would join the Kurdistan Region. However, this referendum was never held. Between 2014 and 2017, due to the weakening of federal authorities caused by the war with ISIS, these areas came under Kurdish control. After the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, federal forces forcibly retook these territories. A key example is oil-rich Kirkuk, whose population is divided mainly among Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs, with each group claiming to be the indigenous or rightful dominant community.

The status of the Turkmen is another sensitive issue, at least from their perspective, as they seek recognition as the third major group in Iraq, equal to Arabs and Kurds. A key challenge is their internal division into Shiite and Sunni Turkmen. During the war with ISIS, many Sunni Turkmen reportedly killed their Shiite neighbors, especially in the district of Tel Afar. Additionally, Sunni Turkmen receive support from Turkiye, while Shiite Turkmen are backed by the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashed al-Shaabi) and Iran.

3.4 Political and security-related

One of the most sensitive topics is corruption. This issue is, of course, frequently discussed, and there is a full awareness of its widespread nature. However, accusations directed at specific individuals or entities can be problematic.

Another problem of which there is widespread awareness is tribalism. Among the educated layers of society, especially young people, there is a declarative rejection of tribalism; however, in reality, bonds based on so-called tribal *asabiyyah* remain very strong. This often leads to the use of violence in response to “insults to honor,” although in recent years Iraq has tried to curb this through anti-terrorism laws. A sensitive issue is also the matter of collaboration by some sheikhs with ISIS and the bloody reckonings that occurred within tribes following ISIS's defeat.

Another sensitive issue is the role of various forces—especially the Peshmerga, Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashed al-Shaabi), the Iraqi army, and Sunni tribal forces—in the war against ISIS, as well as the actual and alleged abuses against people suspected of links to ISIS. Depending on the social group, the contributions of certain groups are exaggerated while others are downplayed. In particular, among the Kurds—especially in areas controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK)—there is a negative narrative about al-Hashed al-Shaabi, portraying them as a sectarian, pro-Iranian force hostile to Kurds and Sunnis and terrorizing Iraq. Among Yazidis and Kurds, the ISIS attack on Sinjar (Shengal) in August 2014 is a highly sensitive topic. At that time, the PDK-controlled Peshmerga forces fled and abandoned the

Yazidis to slaughter, and ultimately, rescue came from the PKK—a fact some Yazidis have not forgotten despite efforts by the PDK to promote a different narrative.

Another sensitive topic is the regionalization of Iraq. The constitution allows for this possibility, and from time to time the idea of creating regions other than Kurdistan emerges. However, it is generally treated as a threat to Iraq's territorial integrity, and broader debates on this issue are not permitted.

The assessment of the Ba'ath Party era and, in particular, Saddam Hussein's rule remains a highly sensitive topic in Iraq. Among Sunnis, there are many who do not view that period negatively. In other groups—especially Shiites and Kurds—such views occasionally appear but tend to reflect an idealization of the past amid current difficulties. The official and dominant narrative condemns the Ba'ath Party and those associated with it.

Muktada as-Sadr is an extremely sensitive topic in Iraq due to his strong personal reactions and the fanatical devotion of his supporters.

The issue of democratization in Iraq is a sensitive topic. Both the evaluation of Iraq's democratic state and the assessment of anti-government protests, as well as the motives behind and consequences of introducing democracy, provoke strong reactions.

3.5 Foreign

Foreign-related sensitive issues in Iraq vary significantly depending on the ethno-religious and political component. While criticism of other countries and their roles in Iraq is widespread, addressing specific topics can sometimes provoke violent reactions. The countries whose involvement elicits the strongest emotions are Israel, the United States, Iran, Turkiye, and the Sunni Arab states of the region.

- **Israel** – A negative attitude toward Israel unites Shiites, Sunnis, and religiously oriented Kurds. However, among the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), this stance is more nuanced. Until recently, the Kurdistan Regional Government (led by the PDK) was even accused by Iran of collaborating with Israel. This complexity is reflected in the media narrative: media outlets affiliated with the PDK tend to portray Israel in a relatively balanced manner, whereas Shiite media predominantly refer to Israel as a "Zionist entity." Formally, any positive portrayal of Israel is prohibited across Iraq, and calls for normalization of relations with Israel are punishable by life imprisonment—a law introduced not by the Shiites but during Saddam Hussein's regime.
- **USA** – Susceptibility to negative narratives about the United States is very high in Iraq, though the underlying reasons vary among different ethno-religious and political groups. Among Sunnis, negativity largely stems from their negative assessment of the 2003 U.S. invasion and the subsequent occupation of Iraq. They view these events as catastrophic, leading to destabilization, violence, and loss of sovereignty. Pro-Iranian Shiites and Sadrist followers also hold a negative perception of the American occupation but with nuanced reasons. While they strongly oppose Saddam Hussein and welcomed

his removal, they attribute hostile motives to the U.S., accusing it of using anti-Shiite policies. Many Shiites consider the 1991 uprising a prime example: they believe the U.S. encouraged the Shiite rebellion only to allow Saddam to brutally suppress it, as the Americans viewed the Shiites as aligned with Iran and sought to weaken them. Furthermore, U.S. support for Israel provokes negative emotions across many groups in Iraq. The idea of the U.S. “bringing democracy” to Iraq is generally rejected or ridiculed, which creates fertile ground for propaganda from states like Russia. However, the concept of democracy itself is not broadly criticized, especially by pro-Iranian Shiite groups, as they are beneficiaries of the current political system, which they consider democratic. Among Kurds, sympathy towards the U.S. is greater than in other groups. Yet many Kurds still share certain stereotypes about the U.S., such as American interest being primarily in oil or driven by the military-industrial complex.

- **Iran’s** presence in Iraq primarily stirs negative emotions among Sunni Arabs and parts of the Kurdish population—especially within the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), and to a lesser extent among other Kurdish groups. However, a significant portion of Shiites also disapproves of Iran’s excessive influence in Iraq. Historically, for several hundred years, anything associated with Iran in Iraq was portrayed negatively. This is especially tied to the Iran-Iraq War, although it should be noted that three-quarters of Iraq’s population was born after the war ended. Other historical events also contributed to negative perceptions—for example, in jihadist narratives, Shiites were derogatorily called “Buyids” or “Safavids,” references to Iranian dynasties that once ruled parts of Iraq in the distant past. The Sadrist movement holds an ambivalent attitude towards Iran. On one hand, it is shaped by Arab nationalism, which Muktada as-Sadr’s father propagated, and on the other hand, Iran supported Muktada against the U.S. during the occupation of Iraq. Meanwhile, pro-Iranian forces promote a positive image of Iran, particularly those known as the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq” (muqawama), which are part of the Popular Mobilization Units (Hashed al-Shaabi). These groups have significant political, media, economic, and military influence in Iraq. Iran’s influence is also closely linked to the millions of pilgrims traveling from Iran to Iraq each year, which has enormous economic significance and serves as a tool of social influence.
- **Turkiye’s** perception in Iraq is shaped largely by its military actions on Iraqi soil, which are considered illegal under international law, and disputes over the Tigris and Euphrates river waters. However, attitudes toward Türkiye are diverse among Iraqi communities. A key instrument of Turkish influence is the Turkmen minority (especially Sunni Turkmens), part of the Sunni Arab population, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK). Although many Kurds affiliated with the PDK express personal dislike toward Türkiye, the institutional relations, Turkish media influence, and economic ties in the Kurdistan Region are very strong. For example, the PDK-linked Kurdish security forces have been known to suppress reporting about civilian casualties of Turkish airstrikes on PKK fighters, often resorting to repression. By contrast, other Kurdish groups and pro-Iranian circles—especially those connected to Qais al-Khazali and voiced by outlets such as Al Ahad TV—maintain a negative narrative toward Türkiye.

- **Sunni Arab states (in particular the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar)** — among Kurds and Sunnis there prevails a positive perception of their role in Iraq, while pro-Iranian forces accuse these states of having supported ISIS, and then being behind the protests in 2019, and the Emirates were said to have controlled Kadhimi's government.
- **Europe/West** – the perception of Europe is not the same as that of the United States. More negative perceptions concern the United Kingdom, but this mainly affects Shiites, especially the Sadrist movement. This is partly linked to the colonial era, which can be subject to information manipulation (particularly by Russia). It should be remembered that Iraq was a British mandate territory, and in 1920 the British brutally suppressed the Iraqi revolution—an important event for both Shiites and Sunnis. Negative narratives regarding Europe can also be connected to issues such as migration, accusations of racism and Islamophobia, as well as “demoralization.” On the other hand, even Sadr and pro-Iranian forces express openness to cooperation with Europe in economic, cultural, and educational fields. The participation of countries like Poland in the occupation of Iraq is insignificant because, in widespread public consciousness, it was an American or possibly American-British occupation.
- **Russia/China** – the perception of these countries is not burdened by negative elements, although in Russia's case it could be possible (for example, Russia's support for Saddam Hussein in narratives aimed at Shiites, etc.). Russia demonstrates very strong diplomatic activity while diversifying its messaging. It seeks to influence Shiites through its ties with Iran, while its positive image among Sunnis is built on its opposition to the U.S. intervention in 2003. In Kurdistan, Russian oil and gas companies are very active, and Russia also influences the Kurds through the Kurdish diaspora in Russia. It should not be forgotten that Mustafa Barzani found refuge in Moscow after the fall of the Kurdish Mahabad Republic in Iran in 1946 and stayed there until 1958 together with his son Masud—the current leader of the PDK.

CHAPTER 4. Psychological Vulnerabilities of Iraqi Society: A Cultural, Economic, and Psychosocial Analysis

Iraq, a country known as the cradle of civilization, also bears the scars of modern conflicts that have deeply affected the psyche of its inhabitants. After decades of wars, crises, and social transformations, Iraqis face the difficult task of rebuilding not only their country but also their mental health. The psychological sensitivities of this community are shaped by a mixture of trauma, strong cultural bonds, and an unceasing desire for stability.

From the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, through the U.S.-led coalition invasion in 2003, to the fights with ISIS, Iraqis have experienced destruction that has left lasting marks on their psyche. Many of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and symptoms such as irritability, nightmares, or depression are a daily reality for those who survived bombings and displacements.

The most dramatic consequence of traumatic experiences in Iraq is indeed their impact on children. The youngest generation of Iraqis, raised amid continuous threats, faces significant emotional and developmental problems that deeply shape the psychological sensitivities of Iraqi society.

Traditionally, the family in Iraqi society has served as a source of emotional and material support. However, wars and economic crises have weakened this structure. Migrations, both internal and abroad, have separated loved ones, leading to isolation and loneliness. Nevertheless, many families still strive to maintain traditional bonds, which provide Iraqis with strength to endure.

Islam, the predominant religion in Iraq, is for many a source of hope and comfort. Prayers, pilgrimages to holy sites, and faith in destiny help many people cope with difficulties. Yet, religion—which ideally should unite—has also become one of the causes of division. Conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites have heightened social tensions and contributed to increased levels of stress and anxiety.

Lack of economic stability is indeed a significant factor deepening the psychological crises in Iraq. High unemployment rates, especially among the youth, lead to frustration, feelings of hopelessness, and learned helplessness. Many young people dream of leaving a country where prospects for a better life are scarce.

Mental health problems are often ignored or stigmatized, which additionally impedes access to professional help. The shortage of qualified specialists and the lack of mental health infrastructure are challenges that Iraq still has to face.

Young Iraqis live torn between traditional values and the influences of globalization. On one hand, they feel social pressure to fulfill traditional roles imposed by culture; on the other, they dream of a modern life open to the world. This internal tension can be a source of conflicts and stress but also serves as a catalyst for social change.

4.1 Main psychological stressors in Iraq

Iraqis, as a society affected by numerous conflicts, struggle with various psychological stressors that impact their mental health and daily life. Below are presented the main sources of stress in Iraq, which stem from historical, social, political, and economic challenges. The psychological stressors in Iraq are multidimensional and deeply rooted in traumatic history, political instability, religious tensions, and economic crises. Their effects are visible both at the individual and social levels, leading to an increase in mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Solving these problems requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving mental health systems, educating society, and rebuilding social bonds. Despite enormous difficulties, Iraqis show exceptional resilience, which can be the foundation for future changes.

4.1.1 War traumas of Iraqis and their long-term effects

Wars that have afflicted Iraq over the past decades have left deep scars in the society of this country. Conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1991), the U.S. invasion in 2003, and the fight against the Islamic State have had a destructive impact on the mental and social health of Iraqis. The aim of this publication is to examine the long-term effects of war traumas in Iraq, taking into account psychological, social, and economic aspects, based on the analysis of literature and available empirical research.

War trauma is defined as a mental disorder resulting from the experience of armed conflict, encompassing both direct exposure to violence and the loss of social stability. In the case of Iraq, traumatic experiences include bombings, mass executions, forced displacements, as well as testimonies of chemical attacks, such as the Halabja massacre in 1988, where as a result of the use of chemical weapons more than 5,000 people died (Human Rights Watch, 1989).

4.1.2 The extent of war traumas among Iraqis

Psychological effects of conflicts

According to research conducted by UNHCR in 2019, about 23-30% of Iraqis suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Children who have spent their growing years in continuous danger are particularly affected. Symptoms such as chronic anxiety, nightmares, and learning difficulties are common among youth. A 2018 UNICEF study showed that 92% of internally displaced children experience mental disorders related to violence and instability.

Research conducted by international organizations, such as WHO and UNICEF, indicates alarmingly high rates of trauma among Iraqis, which directly impact their sensitivities.

PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder): According to a study published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress (2017), about 23–30% of adult Iraqis suffer from PTSD as a result of direct exposure to war violence. This number is significantly higher among war veterans and displaced persons.

Depressive disorders: The WHO report from 2018 states that about 37% of the Iraqi population shows symptoms of depression related to war trauma and uncertainty about the future.

Anxiety and chronic stress: A high frequency of panic attacks and anxiety disorders occurs especially among women who were often victims of sexual violence during the wars.

Youth of Iraq in relation to psychological sensitivities

Wars in Iraq have had a catastrophic impact on young Iraqis, shaping their psyche in ways that may have long-term consequences for the entire society. Trauma, loss of family, lack of access to education and security have left lasting marks on their lives. Children and youth growing up in armed conflict zones are particularly vulnerable to the psychological effects of war. In the case of Iraq, where armed conflict has dominated for decades, young people have become witnesses and victims of violence, displacement, death of loved ones, and the loss of fundamental rights. War-induced trauma can lead to long-term psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, as well as changes in emotional and social functioning.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of the most commonly diagnosed conditions among young Iraqis. In a study conducted by the Journal of Traumatic Stress (2017), approximately 30% of children and adolescents living in war zones showed symptoms of PTSD, such as:

- **Nightmares:** recurrent dreams related to traumatic events.
- **Avoidance of stimuli:** children avoid places and situations that remind them of the trauma.
- **Hyperactivity:** states of excessive arousal, difficulty concentrating, irritability.

Example: in Mosul, which for years was under the control of the Islamic State, it was recorded that 50% of children suffer from chronic symptoms of PTSD.

One of the most frequently observed effects of these sensitivities is social isolation, which has its source in traumatic experiences such as violence, loss of loved ones, and displacement. Social isolation, combined with aggression, communication disorders, and family disintegration, leads to difficulties in adaptation and development among young Iraqis who grow up in conditions of war.

Social isolation among children and youth has its roots in individual traumas and structural social changes caused by the war.

Individual trauma: Children who have experienced violence, such as bombings, armed attacks, or the death of loved ones, often withdraw from social contacts, seeing others as a potential threat.

Loss of sense of belonging: Displacements and migrations force children to leave familiar communities, leading to feelings of alienation. UNHCR research indicates that between 2014 and 2017, approximately 3 million Iraqis, including 1.5 million children, were internally displaced.

Consequences of isolation

- **Interpersonal problems:** young Iraqis have difficulty building trust and relationships with their peers, which limits their ability to participate in social life.
- **Loneliness:** Children in refugee camps, where stable social structures are lacking, often suffer from chronic loneliness, which can lead to depression.
- **Social exclusion:** Isolation makes children more vulnerable to marginalization, which further hinders their reintegration into society.

Aggression and excessive emotional reactions (Violence as a defense mechanism)

War changes the mechanisms by which children cope with emotions, often leading to excessive reactions such as aggression or outbursts of anger. Witnessing brutality, such as street fights or domestic violence, can lead to the internalization of aggression as a natural way of dealing with difficulties. Aggression can be a defensive reaction, arising from the need to protect oneself against imagined or real threats.

Children exhibiting aggressive behaviors have difficulty adapting to social structures such as schools or local communities. Aggressive behaviors lead to social stigmatization, which reinforces isolation and feelings of alienation.

War also affects children's ability to express emotions and communicate their needs, resulting in communication disorders.

Communication disorders

Children avoid talking about their traumatic experiences, which makes it difficult for them to express their feelings and needs. In war-affected regions, there is a lack of adults who could support children in developing communication skills. Communication difficulties lead to problems in relationships with peers and adults, which in turn generates further sensitivity: a lack of ability to communicate effectively and limited participation of children in social life.

Communication disorders directly affect the functioning of families as the basic support unit. Children orphaned by war often remain under the care of extended relatives, which leads to tensions within these "new" family structures. A direct consequence is the situation in which children lose trust in adults and other authorities, such as teachers. Moreover, children's emotionality is often disturbed. Older children frequently have to take on adult responsibilities, which impacts their emotional and social development.

Problems with integration in school and community

Children who have experienced or been shaped by war-related trauma face many difficulties adapting to new environments, such as schools, which significantly affects their level of education and the knowledge gained from the system. This, in turn, directly contributes to a vulnerability characterized by a low level of critical thinking. Concentration and memory disorders, as well as difficulties in establishing lasting trust-based relationships, are leading factors shaping sensitivity to misinformation within this group.

Adaptive barriers

The adaptive barriers faced by Iraqis are multidimensional and include psychological, social, economic, and cultural aspects. Children with experiences of displacement are often perceived as "different," which impedes their generational integration. Secondary integration problems are a good example of this. Iraqis who migrate to countries with different cultures often encounter difficulties adapting to new social and cultural norms.

One example is the difficulty Iraqi women face integrating into Western societies. In refugee camps in neighboring countries such as Jordan or Türkiye, Iraqis often experience social exclusion. Stigmatization related to ethnic or religious affiliation further complicates building relationships with local communities. Internal displacement has caused the loss of traditional support structures such as multigenerational families and neighborhood communities. All these factors, along with the lack of a sense of belonging in new communities, lead to vulnerabilities based on isolation and difficulties in integration.

4.1.3 Political and Economic Instability

Iraq, a country with a rich history and vast natural resources, has struggled for decades with destabilization, which hinders its reconstruction and development. Wars, internal conflicts, and corruption have weakened state structures and caused economic collapse, making Iraq one of the most unstable places in the world.

It all began with the devastating war with Iran in the 1980s, which left the country indebted and weakened. Subsequent conflicts, such as the 2003 U.S. invasion and the fight against the Islamic State, deepened political and social chaos. Iraq faces internal conflict among three main groups: Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Although the government has tried to unite the country, religious and ethnic tensions often escalate. The Kurdistan region, which has autonomy from Baghdad (formally: the second federal tier), continuously disputes oil reserves and the scope of its independence.

In addition, corruption permeates all levels of administration. In 2022, Iraq ranked near the bottom in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Lack of trust in the government has triggered social protests since 2019, involving thousands of Iraqis demanding change.

Iraq is one of the world's largest oil producers, yet its economy is in a tragic state. Over 90% of state revenue comes from oil exports, making the economy vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices.

The oil price drop in 2020 caused a budget collapse, and the lack of economic diversification prevented other sectors' recovery. Simultaneously, infrastructure destruction, lack of investment, and pervasive corruption mean Iraqis cannot rely on basic services such as electricity or water.

Humanitarian Crisis in Numbers

- **6 million displaced persons:** the number of people who had to leave their homes as a result of wars and internal conflicts.
- **25% in poverty:** one in four Iraqis lives below the poverty line, lacking access to basic means of living.
- **14% unemployment:** lack of work especially affects youth entering the job market in a country without prospects.

Since 2019, massive social protests have been taking place in Iraq. People demand access to water, electricity, and decent living conditions. They protest against injustice, corruption, and the lack of prospects. Income from oil exports goes mainly to the political elite, which deepens social inequalities. The majority of society lives in poverty, while a small group benefits from the country's natural resources.

Oil-Based Economy

Nearly 90% of the state budget and as much as 99% of Iraq's exports come from crude oil. Iraq, as one of the richest countries in oil reserves, theoretically should be the economic leader in the Middle East region. However, the reality is completely different. After decades of conflicts, corruption, and lack of economic reforms, the country struggles with serious economic problems. The main challenges include dependence on crude oil, high unemployment, lack of infrastructure, and huge social inequalities.

During the oil price crisis in 2020, related to the COVID-19 pandemic, Iraq was on the brink of insolvency. At that time, the main problem was revealed: lack of economic diversification.

Iraq bases its economy almost exclusively on the extraction and export of crude oil, which constitutes:

- **90% of the state's budget revenues,**
- **99% of exports,**
- **65% of the country's GDP.**

Such economic monoculture makes Iraq particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices on the global market. Price drops, like those in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, lead to budget collapses, reducing the state's ability to provide basic services.

Impact of the Economic Situation on Vulnerabilities

Unemployment and poverty: High unemployment and poverty are among the most serious socio-economic problems in Iraq. In 2021, unemployment was over 14%, exceeding 27% among youth. Poverty: 25% of the population lives below the poverty line, which means lack of access to basic goods and services. The lack of economic diversification and restrictions in the private sector cause many young people to see no prospects for the future, falling into apathy or engaging in illegal means of financing.

Decades of armed conflicts have destroyed key infrastructure in the country: regular power outages are a daily reality, and access to clean water is limited in many regions, especially in southern Iraq. This picture of state dysfunction affects the range of needs and interests of certain social groups in Iraq, making their vulnerabilities specific—focused on notions of stability, which is perceived through the fulfillment of basic needs.

4.2 Family Relationships of Iraqis and Their Impact on Psychological Vulnerabilities

Family in Iraqi culture plays a key role as a social, economic, and emotional foundation. However, many years of conflicts, migrations, and social transformations have significantly affected the structure and dynamics of family relationships, which translates into the psychological vulnerabilities of Iraq's inhabitants. On one hand, traditional family values offer support in the face of difficulties; on the other hand, social pressure and the breakdown of bonds under the influence of crises can generate additional stress and make Iraqis vulnerable to influence.

Family as a Source of Psychological Support

Central Role of the Family

In Iraq, the family is the basic social unit that provides emotional and material support. Multigenerational households are the norm, which allows for sharing responsibilities and problems. Family members support each other in coping with difficult experiences, such as loss of loved ones, displacement, or poverty, which has a significant impact on mitigating psychological vulnerabilities.

Material support: The family often provides financial stability, especially in situations of high unemployment and economic difficulties.

Impact of Communalism

In Iraqi society, belonging to a family and larger clan structures builds a sense of belonging, which can reduce isolation and anxiety. The clan structure in Iraq is one of the oldest and most important elements of social organization. It originates from the traditional tribal system, which has functioned for centuries as a foundation for social, political, and economic relations in the country. Despite modernization and urbanization, clans still play a key role in the daily lives of Iraqis, influencing their identity, loyalties, and attitudes toward state institutions.

A clan in Iraqi society (Arabic: *ashira*) is an extensive social structure based on blood ties and a common ancestor. Clans are divided into smaller units, such as lineages (*fakhd*), which include individual households. The traditional clan system derives from the culture of nomadic tribes that dominated the Middle East for centuries. Most clans in Iraq have Bedouin roots, although some are linked to settled agricultural and urban communities.

Relations between clans can be friendly or hostile, depending on the history of mutual contacts. However, clan solidarity is very strong, which means that conflicts between clans rarely lead to lasting splits.

Belonging to a clan is one of the most important elements of an Iraqi's identity, often more important than loyalty to the state. The clan provides support in crisis situations, such as legal, financial, or personal conflicts. Clans play a key role in mobilizing voters, especially in rural areas. Clan leaders often act as intermediaries between the state and local communities. Importantly, most disputes in local communities are resolved within the clan framework, without involvement of state courts.

Despite advancing globalization and urbanization, clans in Iraq remain a key element of society. Contemporary challenges, such as the need for modernization and building stronger state institutions, may reduce their influence in some areas, but it is hard to imagine completely eliminating their significance. Clans continue to play an important role in shaping Iraqi identity as well as a survival mechanism in difficult socio-political conditions.

Family Structure in Iraq

The family is a fundamental element of Iraqi society, playing a key role in daily life, shaping identity, and maintaining social bonds. The traditional family model in Iraq is based on patriarchal values, intergenerational solidarity, and strong social ties that regulate relationships between family members. Despite ongoing social changes, such as urbanization and globalization, the family structure in Iraq largely remains traditional, especially in rural areas.

The most common family model is multigenerational households. These are the norm in Iraq, particularly in villages and smaller towns. Often, grandparents, parents, children, and sometimes extended relatives live in one home. Each family member has a defined role, with older members, especially grandparents, serving advisory and supervisory functions.

- **Man as Head of the Family:** in the traditional model of the Iraqi family, the man serves as the head of the family, responsible for making decisions and maintaining the household.
- **Role of Women:** women are responsible for managing the home, raising children, and providing emotional support to the family. However, their role is increasingly diverse in cities, where women often take up professional work.
- **Role of Sons:** sons are seen as future breadwinners of the family and are encouraged to study and work in ways that will benefit the family.
- **Role of Daughters:** daughters are raised with their future roles as wives and mothers in mind, although in cities women more often have the opportunity to develop professional careers.

In large cities such as Baghdad or Basra, more and more families consist only of parents and children. This model is becoming more common as a result of urbanization and changing lifestyles. These types of family units often have limited support from other family members, which can increase emotional and financial burdens.

In Iraqi culture, the family acts as a collective, where the good of the family is more important than individual needs. Decisions, such as marriage or education, are often made jointly with consideration of the interests of the entire family.

Arranged marriages are still common, especially in rural and traditional communities. Families play a key role in choosing partners, guided by social, religious, and economic criteria. Younger

generations in cities increasingly choose marriages based on love, but they still seek acceptance and support with the traditional blessing of the family.

- **Intergenerational Solidarity:** Despite social changes, families in Iraq are still characterized by strong solidarity and mutual support.
- **Role of Grandparents:** Grandparents play a key role in raising children and passing down traditions.
- **Collectivism:** The Iraqi family is strongly oriented toward the common good, which shapes the approach to life and relationships between family members.

The family structure in Iraq remains deeply rooted in tradition, dominated by the multigenerational and patriarchal model. The family functions as the main source of emotional, material, and social support. The influence of urbanization, globalization, and conflicts, however, causes changes—especially in large cities—where the number of nuclear families increases and the role of women in public life grows. Despite these changes, the Iraqi family remains the foundation of society, shaping its identity and values.

Impact of Family Relationships on Psychological Vulnerabilities

a) Family as a source of emotional support

- **Stability in an unstable world:** In a country affected by wars and economic crises, the family is often the only constant element in the lives of Iraqis. Sharing difficulties together strengthens emotional bonds and provides a sense of security.
- **Sharing burdens:** In traditional multigenerational families, responsibilities are distributed among family members, which reduces the burden on the individual.

b) Protection against social isolation

- **Belonging and identity:** In a strongly collectivist Iraqi culture, the family provides an individual with a sense of belonging, which is a significant vulnerability [mitigator/protection - note on ambiguity].
- **Support in mourning:** In a society that has experienced many conflicts, families support each other in the process of experiencing grief and coping with the loss of loved ones.

c) Mechanism for Coping with Trauma

- **Cultural and spiritual practices:** in families, shared religious practices, such as prayers or celebration of holidays, help in coping with war trauma and the difficulties of daily life.
- **Traditional rituals:** family traditions and ceremonies help restore a sense of normality after experiencing chaos.

The stimulating impact of family relationships on psychological vulnerabilities

a) Social Pressure

- **Traditional gender roles:** Women often feel overwhelmed by the expectations associated with their role as caretakers of the household, while men are under pressure to be the breadwinners for the family, even in the face of an economic crisis.
- **Expectations towards youth:** Young Iraqis often feel pressured to meet family expectations regarding education, career, or marriage, which can lead to internal conflicts and frustration.

b) Breakdown of Family Bonds

- **Migrations and displacements:** conflicts and economic crises have led to the separation of many families. Separation from loved ones leads to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and lack of emotional support.
- **Death of family members:** the loss of loved ones due to wars and sectarian violence leaves deep psychological wounds, often leading to depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

c) Intergenerational Conflicts

- **Lifestyle changes:** younger generations, especially in cities, strive for greater autonomy and a modern lifestyle, which can be a source of conflicts with more conservative older family members.
- **Lack of understanding:** older generations often perceive changing values as a threat to traditional norms, which can lead to tensions and stress within families and creates vulnerabilities.

d) Domestic Violence

- **Impact of economic stress and war trauma:** high tension caused by poverty, unemployment, and PTSD can lead to violence within families, which negatively affects the mental health of all members, especially children.
- **Stigmatization of family problems:** in Iraqi culture, family conflicts and domestic violence are often treated as private matters, which makes it difficult for victims to obtain help.

4.3 Migration and Refugee Issues in Iraq: Impact on Psychological Vulnerabilities

For decades, Iraq has grappled with forced migrations and refugee issues resulting from years of armed conflict, religious tensions, and political destabilization. The effects of these forced displacements impact not only the material aspects of Iraqis' lives, but also their psychological and emotional resilience. Children and youth, in particular, are exposed to long-term consequences of traumatic experiences.

4.3.1 Internal and External Migration

Internal Migration

Internal migration in Iraq is a significant humanitarian issue resulting from decades of armed conflicts, persecution, and political instability. Since the 1960s, the country has experienced numerous displacements, which intensified after the 2003 invasion and during the fights with the Islamic State between 2014 and 2017.

- **2006–2009:** after the bombing of the Al-Askari mosque in Samarra in 2006, escalating sectarian conflicts led to the displacement of around 1.5 million Iraqis, increasing the total number of internally displaced persons to about 2.7 million.
- **2014–2017:** the Islamic State's expansion caused massive population movements. At the peak, in March 2016, the number of internally displaced persons reached 3.4 million.
- **Gender and Age:** over 80% of the displaced are women and children. Many of these women are single or unaccompanied, with a significant portion being elderly.
- **Ethnic and Religious Divisions:** approximately 58% of the displaced are Sunni Arabs, 29% are Shia Arabs, and the remaining 13% belong to minorities such as Shabak, Christians, or Armenians.

Regions affected by displacement:

- **Baghdad:** about 60% of the displaced come from Baghdad, and the city hosts around 40% of the entire displaced population. Sectarian conflicts have led to the ethnic and religious homogenization of neighborhoods.
- **Northern Iraq:** the crisis in Mosul and the provinces of Nineveh and Dohuk has caused massive displacements, both internal and to the Kurdistan Region.

Barriers to Returning Home:

- **Security:** despite a decrease in conflict intensity, ongoing threats such as bombings and kidnappings discourage displaced people from returning to their places of origin.

- **Living Conditions:** many IDPs have lost their homes or have found them occupied. The lack of access to basic services like water, electricity, and healthcare further complicates return and reintegration.
- **Property Disputes:** unresolved land and property ownership conflicts constitute a significant obstacle in the reintegration process of returnees.
- **Humanitarian Problems:** displaced persons often live in harsh conditions with limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and clean water.
- **Burden on Host Communities:** the influx of a large number of IDPs can cause social and economic tensions in regions hosting displaced populations.
- **Long-term Psychological Impacts:** negative experiences linked to forced displacement contribute to ongoing psychological vulnerabilities among IDPs and returnees.

External Migration

Iraq faces the problem of external migration, being both a destination and a transit country for migrants from the Middle East region. Armed conflicts, political instability, and limited economic opportunities have made Iraq attract various groups of migrants, including refugees and seekers of better living conditions. At the same time, the country faces challenges in managing migration and integrating foreigners. Polarization and negative relations, including competition over resources, are factors contributing to psychological vulnerabilities. The issue of external migration goes beyond logistical and administrative matters, impacting the economy, society, and state security, thereby complexly shaping psychological vulnerability in this context.

Iraq is a migration destination from the region, especially from countries like Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan:

- **Syrian Refugees:** the conflict in Syria (since 2011) has led to the arrival of about 260,000 refugees in Iraq. Most have found shelter in the Kurdistan Region, where special camps operate, such as Domiz and Gawilan.
- **Immigrants from Iran:** Iraq, particularly its southern provinces, attracts economic migrants from Iran who seek jobs in agriculture and construction sectors.
- **Transit Migrants:** Iraq lies on the migration route for people from Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries trying to reach Europe. These migrants often use illegal routes, which increases risks related to human trafficking and organized crime.

Migrants in Iraq are divided into:

- **Refugees:** people fleeing conflicts and persecutions, seeking protection in Iraq.
- **Economic migrants from neighboring countries:** those for whom Iraq is an opportunity to improve their living conditions.
- **Transit migrants:** people heading to Europe who treat Iraq as a stopover on their journey.

4.3.2 Problems Related to External Migration

Infrastructure Overload

Refugee camps, especially in the Kurdistan Region, have become the epicenter of problems related to infrastructure overload. In many camps, access to clean water is limited, leading to sanitation and health issues. A 2022 UNHCR report indicates that 43% of camp residents in the Kurdistan Region have limited access to running water. Temporary shelters, such as tents and barracks, are overcrowded and often unsuitable for long-term habitation. For example, in the Domiz camp, less than 10 square meters of living space is available per family. Camps often have only basic medical facilities, which cannot serve all those in need. Overcrowding and inadequate sanitary conditions promote the spread of diseases such as cholera and hepatitis A.

The influx of migrants increases pressure on local resources, including education and healthcare systems. Cities like Erbil and Mosul struggle with infrastructure overload, generating resentment and frustration among local communities.

Competition for Resources

Economic migrants and refugees often compete with the local population for jobs, especially in the agriculture and construction sectors. Local communities fear that their employment opportunities will be limited due to the influx of migrants willing to work for lower wages. Similar to other countries in the region, the issue of migration and its perception is a factor contributing to psychological vulnerabilities.

The influx of refugees overloads educational, healthcare, and infrastructure systems. In cities like Erbil and Mosul, there are shortages of places in schools and hospitals, causing frustration among both the local population and migrants. Both factors contribute to the provocation of conflicts.

Cultural and Religious Differences

Iraq is already deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines. The influx of migrants from different cultures and faiths further complicates social relations. For example, Syrian refugees, who are mostly Sunnis, often settle in regions dominated by Shiites. Migrants frequently live in isolated communities, which hinders building relationships with local residents and also promotes informational separation.

Security Issues

External migration in Iraq is a phenomenon that has a significant impact on the country's stability and security. Iraq, being both a destination and a transit country for migrants, faces challenges related to border control, illegal population flows, and the integration of refugees. Migrants from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran often use illegal routes to enter or pass through Iraq. Smuggling networks controlling migration routes pose a threat to border security. According to UNHCR reports, between 2020 and 2023 there has been an increase in smuggling activity at the borders with Türkiye and Iran. Migrants, especially women and children, are vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups.

Weak border control in Iraq allows infiltration by members of terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), which are attempting to revive their structures in the region. Some migrants, deprived of means of livelihood and support, become susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups.

Ethnic and Religious Tensions

Migrants often differ from local communities in terms of ethnicity and religion, which leads to tensions. The influx of Syrian refugees (mainly Sunnis) into Shiite-majority regions deepens already existing religious divides. External migration is sometimes exploited by political groups as a tool to strengthen divisive rhetoric and social polarization, transferring psychological vulnerabilities stemming from migration consequences onto Iraq's internal political scene.

ETHNO-SECTARIAN STRUCTURE

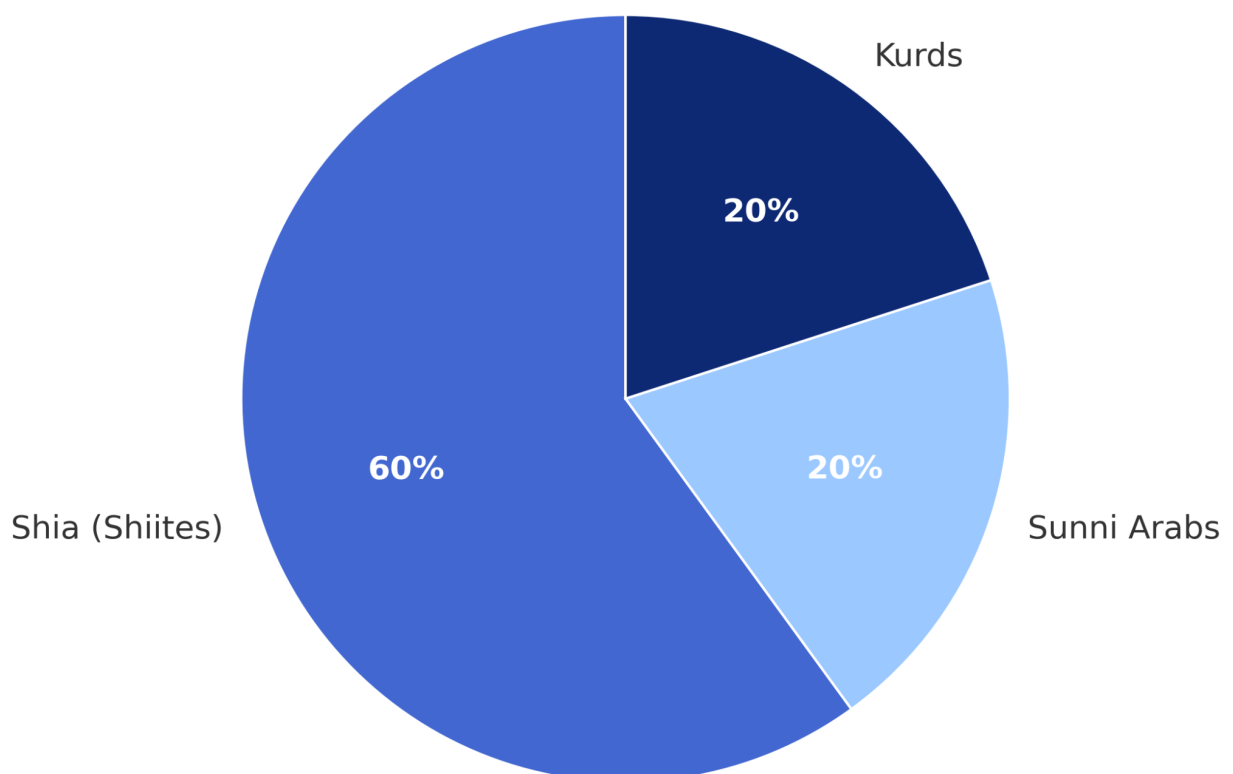


Chart 4. The ethno-sectarian structure of Iraq

4.4 Religious Structure of Iraq

Iraq is a country with a rich history and an extremely complex religious and communal structure. Since ancient times, the lands of present-day Iraq have been the birthplace of great civilizations such as the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. Today, Iraq is characterized by a mosaic of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, making it one of the most diverse countries in the Middle East. The religious structure of Iraq, composed of various faith groups, has a profound impact on the psychological sensitivities of its inhabitants. In a country where religious identity often permeates daily life and social relationships, both conflicts between groups and their internal solidarity shape emotions, beliefs, and ways of coping with difficulties.

Iraq is inhabited by followers of three main religions:

1. **Islam** – the dominant religion, divided into two main branches:
 - Sunnis (about 30–35% of the population),
 - Shiites (about 60–65% of the population), predominantly in the southern regions of the country.
2. **Christianity** – a religious minority that includes various denominations such as the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church.
3. **Smaller religious communities**, including:
 - Yazidis,
 - Mandaeanes,
 - Jews (historically a significant community, now nearly absent).

Religious Diversity of Iraq

1. Ancient Period: Development of polytheistic religions in Mesopotamia.
2. Islamization: After the conquest of the region by the Arabs in the 7th century CE, Islam became the dominant religion.
3. Ottoman Period: Diversity of communities under the control of the Ottoman Caliphate.
4. Colonial and Modern Era: Increase in tensions between religious groups influenced by colonial policies and the formation of the nation-state.

Communality and Relations Between Religious Groups as a Factor Stimulating Psychological Vulnerability:

1. Shiites and Sunnis:
 - Conflicts arising from historical doctrinal and political differences.
 - Disproportions in access to power, particularly visible during Saddam Hussein's era, when Sunnis dominated politically.
2. Religious Minorities:
 - Yazidis as victims of persecution by ISIS.
 - Christians forced into emigration due to violence and discrimination.
3. Importance of Local Communities:
 - In rural communities, tribal and religious identity plays a key role.

Religious and Communal Risk Areas

1. Sectarian Conflicts: Intensified after the US invasion in 2003.
2. Religious Extremism: Activities of organizations such as ISIS.
3. Minority Emigration: Decline in the number of Christians and Yazidis.
4. Role of Religion in Politics:
 - Shiite Islam has become the dominant political force after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.
 - Problems Related to Forming an Inclusive Government.

Contemporary history of Iraq is rich in conflicts with a religious background. At the beginning of the 2000s, tensions between Shiites and Sunnis escalated, leading to brutal clashes and human tragedies. Such experiences often left a lasting mark on the psyche and vulnerabilities stemming from religious identity. Although conflicts cause suffering, religion in Iraq also serves a therapeutic function. Rituals such as the observance of Ashura in Shiite communities allow the collective expression of grief, which has a purifying effect on emotions. Pilgrimages to holy sites like Karbala and Najaf help people find spiritual solace and strength to continue life. Prayer and the social role of religion also help build a sense of community, which reduces feelings of loneliness and aids in coping with trauma. This has the potential to mitigate vulnerabilities built upon religious polarization.

In Iraq, religion and politics are inseparably linked. The political marginalization of Sunnis after the fall of Saddam Hussein caused frustration and a sense of injustice. Extreme polarization between religious groups often generates mistrust and mutual hostility, which affect the psychology of society and its vulnerability to extremism.

In Iraq, religion constitutes one of the most important pillars of social identity. Its significance is reflected in the sense of belonging. Members of religious groups such as Shiites, Sunnis, Yazidis, or Christians feel a strong bond with their community, which provides them with a sense of security and support. This strong belonging generates psychological sensitivities: religious minorities, for example Yazidis or Christians, who have experienced violence and persecution, often struggle with trauma, low self-esteem, and exclusion, which creates opportunities for applying inspirational or empowering interventions.

Religious Leaders (Selected Aspects)

Religious leaders are not only spiritual guides but also significant players on the public stage. Their authority extends far beyond the temples, influencing the shaping of politics, mediation in conflicts, and the everyday life of the faithful. Below are presented the most important religious leaders of Iraq and their role in the country.

The Most Important Religious Leaders in Iraq	
The Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani Religious Group: Shiites	• Ali al-Sistani is the highest religious authority (marja) of Iraqi Shiites. • His seat is located in Najaf, one of the holiest cities of Shiite Islam. • Known for his pragmatic approach, he avoids direct involvement in politics, but his voice has a huge influence on government decisions and society. • He played a key role in calming the situation after the US invasion in 2003, urging calm and encouraging Shiite participation in democratic processes. • He has supported reform movements, calling on the government to fight corruption and improve citizens' lives. • His positions are widely respected both in Iraq and beyond its borders.
Muqtada al-Sadr Religious Group: Shiites	• Muqtada al-Sadr is the son of cleric Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr and the leader of the Sadrist movement. • Known for his radicalism, he led the militia known as the "Mahdi Army," which was active during the conflicts following the US invasion. • Currently, he is engaged in politics, leading a movement of mixed religious and political character that calls for reforms and fighting corruption. • His political base mainly consists of poor residents of Baghdad and the southern regions of Iraq.

Sunni leaders: Political: Mohammad al-Halbusi; Khamis al-Khanjar; Mahmud al-Maszhadani Religious: Ahmed Hassan al-Taha; Mohsen Abdel Hamid; Ibrahim al-Naama; Muthana Harith al-Dari; Abdul Latif al-Hamim; Afif al-Din al-Gilani; Nehru al-Kasnazani Religious Group: Sunni	• After the 2003 war, Sunnis lost their dominant political position, which caused fragmentation of their leadership. • Sunni religious leaders, such as clerics from the Umm al-Qura Mosque in Baghdad, played an important role in mediating between religious groups and calling for peaceful conflict resolution. • These leaders often have to balance between the demands of local communities and the pressures from armed groups and radical movements. • The authority of Sunni religious leaders is smaller and more dispersed (authority is within smaller groups) compared to Shiite leadership (hawzas and marja'iyya). They also do not play a significant political role.
Spiritual Leaders of the Yazidis The Most Important Figure: Baba Sheikh	• The Yazidis, a religious minority concentrated in the Sinjar region, struggle with persecution, especially after the genocide committed by ISIS. • Baba Sheikh serves both as a spiritual guide and a leader supporting the community's reconstruction after traumatic experiences. • His role is to maintain Yazidi religious traditions and to build dialogue with other religious groups.
Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako Religious Group: Christians (Chaldean Church)	• Louis Raphaël Sako is the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, the largest Christian community in Iraq. • His efforts focus on protecting the rights of Christians, who have been forced to emigrate for decades due to conflicts and persecution. • He actively participates in interreligious dialogue, promoting peace and cooperation among different religious groups.

Religious leaders in Iraq are figures of immense authority who shape the country's fate on many levels. Their actions are crucial in promoting ideas, maintaining community functioning, and protecting cultural and religious identity. In a world full of tensions, their role remains key both for the faithful and for the political dimension of Iraq. The relationship between clergy and society creates a sensitivity to authoritarian influence on selected social and religious groups.

The Influence of Religious Norms on the Behavior of Iraqis

Religious norms strongly permeate everyday, social, and political life. Religion is not merely a spiritual matter – it forms the foundation of the social structure, shaping behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making. Below are discussed the key aspects of the influence of religious norms on the behavior of Iraqis.

Religion is one of the most important pillars of identity in Iraq. Shiites, Sunnis, Yazidis, Christians, and other religious groups define their social and cultural belonging based on religious traditions. Religious norms influence:

- **Creating Social Bonds:** Members of religious communities are strongly connected by shared rituals, traditions, and values.
- **Exclusion of the "Others":** Religious norms that emphasize doctrinal differences can lead to divisions and the exclusion of people outside a given religious group.

The Role of Religious Norms in the Family

Religion, mainly Islam, exerts a dominant influence on family life in Iraq. The division of society into Sunnis and Shiites, although differing in details of interpretation, is based on shared ethical and moral principles that play a key role in defining family roles and the dynamics of relationships.

- **Hierarchical Family Structure:** in traditional Iraqi families, the man, as the head of the family, is responsible for its maintenance and protection, while the woman focuses on raising the children and managing the household. This model is strongly supported by religious teachings on the division of gender roles.
- **Role of Children:** children are regarded as a blessing from God. Their upbringing takes place in a spirit of religiosity, with an emphasis on respecting elders and observing moral norms.

Marriage in Iraq is not only a contract between two people but also an event of deep religious and social significance.

1. **Arranged Marriage:** although arranged marriages are increasingly less common in large cities, they remain the norm in rural areas. Religious values emphasize the role of the family in choosing a suitable partner to ensure compatibility in terms of faith and tradition.
2. **Polygamy:** permitted by Islam, polygamy is practiced in some parts of Iraq, although its popularity is declining in cities. It is important to note that religion imposes on the man the duty to treat all wives equally.

The family in Iraq remains a key element of society, despite numerous challenges related to social and political transformation. Religious values still play a central role in defining the roles and responsibilities of its members. However, contemporary changes do not alter the fundamental importance of the family as a source of support and cultural identity.

Religious Holidays and Rituals as Regulation of Behavior

Religious holidays and rituals set the rhythm of life for Iraqis. Religious holidays and rituals are deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, which play a key role in social and individual life. These values not only shape communal bonds but also influence the psychological sensitivity of the population, affecting individuals' emotional and social awareness, their sense of identity, and their capacity for action.

Religious Holidays and Rituals in Iraq:

- **Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr**

Ramadan, the month of fasting, is one of the most important religious events. Practices related to fasting, daily iftars (evening meals after breaking the fast), and tarawih prayers have a strong spiritual and social dimension. The Eid al-Fitr holiday marks the end of Ramadan, bringing joy and relief after a month of self-restraint.

- **Ashura**

Ashura, especially significant for Shiites, commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in the Battle of Karbala. During this holiday, processions and ritual lamentations are organized. Participation in Ashura ceremonies often evokes strong emotions such as sorrow, solidarity, and a sense of justice. Ritual expressions, like reciting elegies, can serve as a form of psychological cleansing but may also contribute to the radicalization of attitudes.

- **Eid al-Adha**

The Feast of Sacrifice commemorates the prophet Ibrahim's willingness to offer a sacrifice. It involves the ritual slaughtering of animals, part of which is distributed to the poor.

- **Daily Life Rituals**

Prayer (salah), communal pilgrimages (hajj), and Quranic recitation are daily religious practices that shape the spiritual and psychological development of Iraqis.

Religious norms in Iraq influence civic and political attitudes. Many people identify with political parties representing their religious group. Recommendations from religious leaders regarding elections or political decisions often shape the behavior of entire communities. The radicalization of attitudes fosters extremist actions. Terrorism in Iraq is a complex phenomenon, whose roots run deep in the country's history, politics, religion, and social structures. Its emergence and development result from the overlap of many factors, from the colonial past to contemporary armed conflicts.

4.5 The Impact of the Economic and Financial Situation on Psychological Sensitivities in Iraq

Iraq, as the second-largest oil producer in OPEC, bases its economy mainly on revenues from the export of this resource. In 2023, Iraq's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) amounted to 250.84 billion US dollars, which represented about 0.24% of the global economy. In 2024, Iraq planned to export a record 18 million tons of fuel oil, corresponding to about 380,000 barrels per day. In comparison, in 2023, exports amounted to 14 million tons. This increase aims to compensate for stagnation in crude oil production caused by extraction limits within the OPEC+ quotas. The decline in oil prices poses a serious challenge to Iraq's public finances. The 2024 budget was set at 211 trillion dinars (approximately 161 billion US dollars) with a projected deficit of 64 trillion dinars. The budget assumes an average oil price of 70 dollars per barrel, which is lower compared to previous years. Consequently, the government plans to increase non-oil revenues by improving tax collection to offset potential losses.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts that the current fiscal expansion will contribute to economic growth in 2024. However, this may also lead to worsening fiscal and external balances, and an increased vulnerability of Iraq to oil price fluctuations.

Iraq's economy faces significant challenges, largely due to its dependence on the oil sector and commodity price volatility. Nonetheless, through economic diversification, infrastructure investments, and fiscal reforms, the country aims to achieve stabilization and sustainable development in the coming years.

The non-oil sector remains underinvested, making the economy highly sensitive to commodity market changes. The lack of industrial and service sector development hampers job creation. Iraq ranks low in global transparency indices, with widespread corruption in public administration and the energy sector absorbing resources that could otherwise support economic and infrastructure development.

The Impact of the Economic Situation on Psychological Sensitivities

Iraq has been struggling for years with deep social problems that are both causes and consequences of the ongoing crisis. Religious tensions, lack of access to basic services, high unemployment rates, and widespread corruption create a complex web of challenges that significantly affect the condition and determinants of the psychological sensitivities of Iraqis.

1. High unemployment rate

The official unemployment rate in Iraq is about 16%, and among young people it reaches even 40%. The labor market depends on the public sector, which is unable to absorb new workers. The lack of employment opportunities leads to social frustration and an increase in political tensions.

2. Deepening Poverty

According to UN reports, about 25% of Iraq's population lives below the poverty line. Unequal access to resources and services exacerbates disparities between regions, especially between cities and rural areas.

Limited access to basic services

1. Educational crisis

- The education system in Iraq suffers from underfunding, infrastructural damage, and a lack of qualified teachers.
- Illiteracy rates are particularly high in rural areas, which limits the development opportunities for young people.

2. Insufficient health care

- The public healthcare system is in a state of crisis due to a lack of funds, shortage of personnel, and infrastructural damage.
- Infectious diseases, such as cholera, are still common in some regions, and access to specialized medical care is significantly limited.

3. Shortage of water and energy

- Iraq is struggling with a water crisis caused by climate change, excessive resource use, and tensions with neighboring countries.
- The energy system is unstable, leading to frequent power outages, especially during summer heatwaves.

Corruption and inefficiency of administration

- Iraq ranks among the lowest in transparency indices, reflecting the extent of the corruption problem.
- Corruption in the public sector limits Iraqis' access to resources, services, and employment opportunities. The low availability of jobs creates vulnerabilities on economic, social, and religious levels. It fosters polarization and inspires extremism. Frustration resulting from unemployment, poverty, and lack of prospects causes increased tensions and a sense of hopelessness.

The government is unable to respond effectively to the needs of citizens due to political instability and the diverse interests of ethnic and religious groups. Many Iraqis seek better living conditions abroad, which leads to a brain drain and deepens the crisis in the country.

In recent years, Iraqis have increasingly taken to the streets, protesting against corruption, injustice, and deficiencies in public services. The protests are often suppressed by force, which increases distrust towards the authorities and a sense of powerlessness in society.

Poverty and Psychological Sensitivities

1. Stress and Uncertainty

Lack of economic stability: High unemployment and low incomes cause a constant feeling of uncertainty about the future. Families living on the edge of poverty often struggle with a lack of basic resources such as food, water, or medical care, which increases stress and anxiety.

Unmet basic needs: The inability to meet basic needs, such as feeding, housing, or children's education, leads to feelings of helplessness and frustration. Stress related to daily survival causes emotional exhaustion, which reduces the ability to make decisions and cope with difficulties.

2. Feelings of Shame and Stigmatization

Loss of dignity: In a culture that strongly emphasizes the value of family and the ability to provide a dignified life for it, poverty often leads to feelings of shame and loss of dignity. Men, who are traditionally responsible for maintaining the family, feel the effects of poverty especially deeply, which influences their self-esteem and social role.

Social marginalization: People living in poverty are often stigmatized as incompetent or lazy, which deepens their social isolation. Marginalization leads to a feeling of being "lesser" and excluded from society.

3. Impact on children and youth

Limited educational opportunities: children from poor families often lack access to adequate education, which limits their development opportunities and chances for a better future. The lack of prospects affects their self-esteem and may lead to feelings of hopelessness.

Children living in poverty are more exposed to domestic violence, exploitation, and child labor, which affects their psychological development. Chronic lack of safety and stability increases the risk of developing mental disorders such as anxiety and depression and contributes to the radicalization of attitudes.

4. Growing Frustration

Poverty among Iraqis causes frustration and anger, which are often transferred to interpersonal relationships both within families and communities. Increased tensions in poor communities can lead to conflicts, violence, and the breakdown of social ties.

Between 2010 and 2015, approximately 3,000 women died as a result of domestic violence in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2015 alone, at least 125 women in six cities of the region committed suicide by setting themselves on fire. Violence against women, female suicides, and femicides sharply increased between 2014 and 2015. In that year, nearly 200 women were burned by others in the region. Additionally, 44% of married women reported being beaten by their husbands for disobedience.

It should be noted that the above statistics mainly concern the Kurdistan region and do not reflect the situation in the whole of Iraq. The lack of nationwide, systematic research and reports

on domestic violence in Iraq hinders full understanding and effective assessment of this problem.

5. Economic Factor and Psychological Sensitivity

People living in poverty are more susceptible to political and religious manipulation, which leads to increased sectarianism and intergroup tensions. Prolonged life in poverty leads to chronic stress, increasing the risk of depression, anxiety disorders, and PTSD. The inability to improve one's material situation results in a sense of hopelessness that affects the whole community. Under such conditions, social disengagement often appears, and young people may seek alternative paths, such as radicalization or emigration. Radicalization greatly facilitates the process of perception manipulation and also creates wide opportunities for disinformation.

Defensive Mechanisms

1. **Social Solidarity:** in many communities, poverty leads to increased solidarity and mutual support, which can serve as a protective mechanism against isolation. Families and neighbors often help each other in difficult situations, which strengthens social bonds.
2. **Religion as a Source of Hope:** for many Iraqis, religion offers comfort and hope amid material hardships, which can mitigate the negative psychological effects of poverty.

Poverty in Iraq has a deep and multifaceted impact on the psychological sensitivities of its inhabitants. The effects of poverty, such as chronic stress, feelings of shame, and lack of prospects, worsen quality of life and lead to health and social problems. At the same time, in the face of these difficulties, Iraqis often find support in social solidarity and religious faith, which helps them cope with challenges.

4.6 Crime in Iraq and Its Impact on Psychological Sensitivities

Iraq has struggled for decades with high levels of crime, resulting from armed conflicts, political instability, and economic difficulties. Crime affects various aspects of society—from physical violence to financial crimes—and has a significant impact on citizens' psychology, increasing feelings of insecurity, stress, and lack of trust in social relations.

Crime in Iraq is deeply rooted in the country's complex political, social, and economic background. Its diverse forms—from domestic violence to the activities of organized criminal groups and terrorist organizations—have serious consequences for the psychology of individuals and the entire society. Below is a detailed analysis of the types of crime in Iraq and their impact on the psychological sensitivities of Iraqis.

4.6.1 Types of crime in Iraq

1. Organized crime

Organized groups engage in trafficking in humans, drugs, weapons, and oil. Acts of violence, such as kidnappings and extortion, are common, and organized crime often cooperates with political elements, which increases the impunity of the perpetrators.

- **Social distrust:** The activity of these groups weakens trust in local authorities and institutions.

2. Terrorism

Terrorism, especially the activity of ISIS, was a key destabilizing factor in Iraq. Terrorist attacks, such as bombings and mass kidnappings, spread fear among the civilian population. ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Islamic State) is an extremist Sunni terrorist organization that played a significant role in destabilizing Iraq and the Middle East region. The organization originated as an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and gained worldwide attention in 2014 when it declared the establishment of a self-proclaimed caliphate in the territories it occupied in Iraq and Syria. ISIS used brutal methods, including mass executions, torture, kidnappings, and bombings. It carried out terrorist attacks on civilians, the military, and infrastructure, spreading fear and chaos. The main sources of funding for ISIS included: oil trade from occupied oil fields, smuggling, extortion and taxes imposed on residents of occupied territories, trafficking in humans and archaeological artifacts. Although the ISIS caliphate was destroyed, the organization still poses a threat. ISIS-affiliated groups carry out attacks on security forces and civilians in northern and western Iraq. ISIS continues to recruit new members in Iraq and abroad, exploiting security gaps and social frustration.

- **Impact on psychology:** chronic stress. The constant presence of threat causes Iraqis to live in a state of insecurity and fear.
- **Child trauma:** children who have experienced violence or the loss of loved ones have difficulties adapting and exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety.

3. Domestic violence and sexual crime

A high level of domestic violence, especially against women, remains a significant social problem. Many cases of sexual violence are hidden due to cultural norms and a lack of legal support.

- **Women's trauma:** victims of domestic violence suffer from depression, low self-esteem, and a lack of a sense of security.
- **Violence against children:** witnesses of domestic violence in the family often develop negative behavioral patterns that can lead to aggression.

4. Corruption

Corruption in the public sector weakens state institutions and blocks citizens' access to resources. The waste of public funds results in the lack of basic services, such as education and healthcare.

- **Social frustration:** Citizens lose trust in the state, which increases the feeling of hopelessness.
- **Social alienation:** The lack of transparency in government actions leads to people's withdrawal from public life.

5. Theft and street crimes

Thefts, robberies, and street violence are particularly common in cities such as Baghdad. Poverty and lack of employment are the main factors driving this form of crime.

- **Sense of threat:** daily life becomes difficult under conditions of widespread insecurity.
- **Change in lifestyle:** people avoid public places, which limits their social activity.

Psychological effects of crime

Chronic stress and anxiety: Crime, especially of an organized and terrorist nature, leads to a constant feeling of threat. Many residents of Iraq experience mental health problems such as anxiety disorders and depression.

People who have witnessed violence or become victims themselves suffer from PTSD. Prolonged exposure to war stress and crime leads to problems with social and emotional functioning. Trust among citizens diminishes, leading to isolation and social disintegration, as well as generating increased violence and frustration in family and neighborhood relations.

The impunity of crime and corruption undermines faith in justice and the rule of law. Citizens become more susceptible to manipulation by extremist groups promising solutions outside the state system.

Psychological costs of crime for children

Children growing up in an atmosphere of violence often exhibit symptoms of depression, anxiety, and problems at school. A high level of aggression and lack of appropriate behavioral models lead to the repetition of negative patterns. Youth from poor and crime-threatened environments are easy targets for terrorist and criminal groups. Lack of education and life opportunities causes some young people to see crime as the only way to survive.

Crime in Iraq has a profound impact on the psychological sensitivities of its inhabitants, leading to chronic stress, trauma, and social disintegration. To reduce these effects, integrated actions are necessary, including political reforms, psychological support, and educational initiatives. Only in this way can Iraq rebuild a sense of security and social trust, which are the foundation of a stable society.

4.7 Perception of the administration and security structures of Iraq and psychological sensitivities

Historical context of Iraq's administration: Iraq has gone through several dramatic stages, including dictatorial regimes, the international coalition invasion, a period of civil war, and the fight against the Islamic State. These experiences have influenced the perception of the administration as ambiguous and often burdened with a lack of trust.

Social trust: Trust in the administration and security structures in Iraq is low, stemming from corruption, incompetence, and inefficiency of the system. For many citizens, security structures are symbols of repression rather than guarantors of stability. Ethnic and religious divisions, such as those between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, significantly affect the perception of the administration. Security structures are often seen as tools of domination by certain political groups over others.

Perception of security refers to the subjective feeling of protection from threats posed by internal and external factors. In Iraq, it is particularly complex, considering the long history of destabilization.

Main sources of threats

- **Terrorism:** attacks by organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have caused a widespread sense of threat.
- **Ethnic and religious conflicts:** divisions between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds reinforce tensions and a sense of insecurity.
- **Corruption and inefficiency of security structures:** lack of professionalism in security services intensifies the lack of trust.

- **Impact of the media on perception of security:** frequent media reports on acts of violence and instability contribute to reinforcing a negative image of the security situation.

Perception of security and collective stress

Collective stress is a psychological phenomenon that affects entire communities under the influence of prolonged crises, such as wars, natural disasters, or political crises. In Iraq, it is the result of the accumulation of traumatic experiences. The continuous lack of a sense of security, caused by terrorist attacks, political instability, and crime, leads to chronic stress. These sensitivities affect how citizens perceive the administration and its ability to protect the population. Numerous conflicts have strengthened the sense of social fragmentation, which hinders the building of a unified national identity. Psychological sensitivities influence how different social groups evaluate the administration's actions and their ability to take independent actions without relying on the state security system. Fear for one's own life and the safety of loved ones leads to social isolation, reluctance to cooperate with the administration, and deepening social polarization.

Psychological mechanisms of perceiving the administration

- **The "us versus them" mechanism**

Social divisions strengthen the tendency to categorize the administration as foreign or hostile, especially in regions that feel marginalized.

- **The effect of collective trauma**

Prolonged conflicts, repression, and crime cause society to tend to project negative emotions onto state institutions, regardless of their actual effectiveness.

- **The role of disinformation and propaganda**

Frequent use of propaganda by various political and military groups has contributed to the polarization of perceptions of security structures, which amplifies distrust towards the administration and creates conditions conducive to confusion.

The perception of security and collective stress in Iraq are closely linked. The lack of a sense of security generates stress, which in turn affects the perception of security structures as ineffective.

Perception of the armed forces in Iraq and their impact on psychological sensitivities

The armed forces of Iraq play a key role in ensuring national security and combating threats such as terrorism and internal conflicts. However, their perception in society is divided and often depends on historical experiences, ethnic affiliation, and place of residence. In this context, the analysis of the perception of the Iraqi armed forces and their impact on the psychological sensitivities of citizens becomes particularly important.

Diverse perceptions depending on region and ethnic groups

- **Shiites:** in many cases, the armed forces are perceived by the Shiite majority as a tool to protect their interests, especially since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime.
- **Sunnis:** for Sunnis, the army is often seen as an instrument of repression, particularly after the marginalization of their role in the country's political life after 2003.
- **Kurds:** for the Kurds, the central government's armed forces are often a symbol of historical oppression, which increases distrust in the autonomous Kurdistan region.

The Iraqi armed forces were discredited as a result of internal conflicts, defeats in external wars, and participation in repression against their own society during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. After 2003, their reconstruction was difficult, and numerous allegations of corruption, nepotism, and incompetence further undermined their authority. Successes in combating the Islamic State (ISIS) improved the image of the armed forces, especially among those who directly experienced threats from terrorism. Nevertheless, the brutal actions of some military units, such as violence against civilians, remain a source of criticism.

Mechanisms of perceiving the armed forces

- **Stereotypes and propaganda**
Social polarization and the use of propaganda by various political groups have influenced the way society perceives the armed forces. In some regions, the army is portrayed as heroes, in others as occupiers.
- **Role of local leaders and media**
Citizens' beliefs about the armed forces are often shaped by narratives promoted by religious and ethnic leaders as well as the media. Negative encounters with military units can contribute to long-lasting prejudices.
- **Effect of personal experiences**
People who have directly encountered assistance from the military tend to have a more positive assessment. Conversely, those who have experienced violence or losses caused by them perceive the armed forces as a threat.

Psychological sensitivities generated by negative actions of the armed forces

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in civilians** - frequent clashes between the armed forces and various armed groups, especially in cities such as Mosul or Baghdad, have left a lasting psychological mark on the civilian population. Many citizens, especially children, suffer from PTSD due to war experiences.
- **Sense of insecurity and fear** - in regions where armed forces are present, residents often feel threatened rather than protected. Especially individuals from ethnic and religious minorities fear abuse of power and repression.

- **Lack of trust in state institutions** - the perception of the army as a corrupt and politicized institution leads to social alienation and a lack of trust in the state. This, in turn, affects the feeling of powerlessness and an increase in stress in society.
- **Impact of collective trauma** - violence related to military interventions, both internal and external, has contributed to the perpetuation of collective trauma, especially among those who survived brutal military operations or witnessed war crimes.

Perception of the Police

The police in Iraq play a key role in maintaining public order and combating crime; however, their image in society is very diverse and marked by many sensitivities.

In Iraq, the police are perceived differently depending on the region, social group, and local residents' experiences.

- **Urban residents**

In cities such as Baghdad, Mosul, or Basra, the police are often criticized for ineffectiveness, corruption, and low ability to respond to crime. At the same time, residents expect them to provide basic security amidst political and social instability.

- **Rural residents**

In rural areas, where state structures are weaker, the police are often seen as a marginal institution. People more often rely on local leaders or militias to resolve disputes.

- **Ethnic and religious minorities**

For some groups, such as Sunnis or Kurds, the police are perceived as a tool of repression, especially in regions with tense relations with the central government. Many believe that officers act in the interest of dominant political groups.

The police in Iraq face numerous problems that hinder their effective operation and building a positive image in society. Corruption at various levels is widespread and leads to a lack of trust in officers. Bribes to avoid responsibility are common, which weakens the police's image as an honest institution. Lack of proper training and equipment means that many officers struggle with the challenges posed by daily work in an unstable country.

In many cases, the police operate under the influence of local political leaders or armed groups, which weakens their independence and ability to act according to the law. Shortages of equipment, poor infrastructure, and limited funds mean that many police stations are unable to provide basic services.

Negative experiences with the police have serious consequences for the perception of this institution and security in the country.

- **Lack of trust**

For many citizens, the police are a symbol of oppression rather than protection. This causes residents not to report crimes or cooperate with officers.

- **Stress and uncertainty**

Frequent accusations of police brutality and abuse of power generate fear among citizens, especially in marginalized communities.

- **Social fragmentation**

The police, acting in the interests of certain ethnic or religious groups, contribute to deepening social and ethnic divisions in Iraq.

Psychological vulnerabilities

1. Between trauma, faith, and the search for stability

Iraq – a country with a rich history, the cradle of ancient civilizations, today still bears the burden of long-standing conflicts, economic instability, and ethnic-religious tensions. These difficult experiences are reflected not only in the country's infrastructure or political condition but, above all, in the psyche of its inhabitants. Iraqis face multidimensional psychological sensitivities that shape daily life, family relationships, and the functioning of society. The starting point to understand the psychological burdens of Iraqis is a history full of brutal conflicts – from the Iran-Iraq war, through the invasion of Iraq in 2003, to the fight against the Islamic State. Years of bombings, displacement, loss of loved ones, and the terrorist threat have caused many people to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and chronic anxiety. The youngest, growing up in an atmosphere of uncertainty and violence, carry traces of trauma that translate into learning difficulties, communication disorders, and problems establishing relationships. This situation generates susceptibility to feelings of isolation, aggression, and withdrawal, and the lack of access to professional psychological support exacerbates the mental health crisis.

2. Family as a stronghold, but also a source of tensions

In traditional Iraqi society, the family has always been a key point of reference – a source of material and emotional support, a guarantee of stability in conditions of constant threat. However, today internal and external migrations are breaking up family structures, weakening bonds and intensifying loneliness and feelings of alienation. Nevertheless, many families still try to nurture traditional community spirit, passing on the strength to survive. At the same time, the family can also be a space of tensions – intergenerational conflicts, domestic violence, and the breakdown of social roles give rise to further psychological sensitivities, especially when pressure from older generations or lack of prospects lead to frustration and conflicts within homes.

3. In the shadow of religion and sectarianism

Religion, being an important pillar of Iraqi identity, serves as spiritual support and hope. Prayers, holidays, pilgrimages to places of worship, and communal rituals can alleviate the effects of trauma by uniting the community and strengthening the sense of belonging. Unfortunately, the diversity of faiths – Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and Yazidis – under conditions of ongoing political and economic tensions often becomes a source of divisions and conflicts. Sectarianism strengthens distrust, a sense of threat, and thus intensifies psychological sensitivities, especially where religion intertwines with politics and the struggle for influence.

4. The shadow of economic instability and corruption

Low economic prospects, high unemployment, and poverty are additional factors shaping the emotional condition of Iraqis. Young people, without a chance for stable jobs, lose faith in the future. The chronic lack of social security leads to frustration and a feeling of helplessness. Many dream of emigration, believing that only outside the borders of Iraq is there a chance for peace and development. Corruption and inefficiency of the administration cause citizens not to trust the authorities, which further deepens psychological tensions – people feel abandoned, neglected, and incapable of influencing their own fate.

5. Between crime and the search for justice

Everyday life in Iraq is often marked by violence – from the terror of extremist groups, through organized crime activities, to thefts and robberies. Fear of threats, a sense of injustice, and impunity of criminals destroy social trust. In such a climate, normal functioning is difficult – people respond with distrust, fear, and often aggression, which itself becomes a form of defense mechanism.

CHAPTER 5. Key Areas of External Influence

5.1 Economic

Iraq's economy is based on the oil industry, and oil is essentially Iraq's only export commodity. The most important foreign investments relate not only to the oil industry but also to natural gas exploration, with the main participants being American, Russian, and Chinese companies. Significant foreign investments also concern the construction sector — Iraq has enormous needs in this area due to war damage, several decades of stagnation, and a very weak communication network: the lack of a significant railway network, no metro in Baghdad, and a poor, outdated road system.

Economic factors also shaping areas of external influence include tourism (particularly religious tourism) and institutionalized smuggling (Turkiye and Iran). Another significant factor is food imports, as Iraq imports about half of its food. This is paradoxical, since civilization was born in Iraq thanks to the fertile lands of Mesopotamia. However, a significant population outflow from rural to urban areas, neglect of agricultural modernization, soil salinization caused by the water crisis, and an unprecedented population increase have caused Iraq to lose its food self-sufficiency. In this context, the two most important consequences of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine for Iraq concern food prices and oil prices.

Russia

The presence of Russian companies in Iraq mainly concerns the oil and gas sector, with Russians being one of the major players, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan. The key Russian companies active in Iraq include Lukoil (since 2014): Operates primarily the West Qurna-2 oil field in the Shiite Basra governorate, producing about 500,000 barrels per day, and "Block 10" on the border of Dhi Qar and Muthanna governorates. Gazprom Neft (since 2010): Operates the Badra oil field in the Shiite Wasit governorate and has activities in the Kurdistan Region under contracts with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) signed in 2012. However, in February 2022, the Iraqi federal court, dominated by pro-Iranian Shiite forces, declared KRG's oil contracts illegal and significantly halted oil exports from Kurdistan. Gazprom Neft's investments in Kurdistan include a 40% share in Garmian (part of the Sarqala field) and 80% shares in Shakal and Halabja fields, all in the southern part of the Kurdistan Region controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). On federal territory, Gazprom's subsidiary Bashneft is active in "Block 12" near Nasiriyah. Rosneft (since 2017): Focuses mainly on the Kurdistan Region and does not operate in federal territories. In 2017 Rosneft signed an agreement with the KRG to develop energy infrastructure and expand cooperation in oil and gas. Rosneft became a crucial financial supporter of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) leadership, including the Barzani family, investing \$3.2 billion, with \$1.2 billion used to cover the KRG budget deficit. In 2019, \$1.8 billion of the KRG's obligations to Rosneft was converted into

a 60% share in the pipeline connecting Kurdistan with Turkiye (in which transport was suspended in 2023, after an international arbitration ruling between Turkiye and Iraq, unfavorable to Turkiye). The remaining 40% belongs to KAR Group – a company controlled by the Barzani family and led by Sheikh Baz Karim, loyal to them. Furthermore, in 2020 it was revealed that Rosneft paid \$250 million to a "consultant" in order to secure contracts in Kurdistan (there are suspicions that this was a bribe given to the Barzani family). This thus creates a community of interests between the PDK, Russia, and Turkiye regarding the resumption of operation of this pipeline, and Ambassador Kutraszew has repeatedly spoken about the necessity of resuming exports from Kurdistan. However, Russia's ties on the one hand with pro-Iranian groups, and on the other hand with the Barzani family, do not determine good relations between the pro-Iranian groups and the Barzanis, between whom the conflict is very deep.

A Russian investment is also the Mali New Center department store in Erbil, implemented by Mali New Company, worth 2 million USD; nevertheless, Russia is not a leading investor in the Kurdistan Region (being surpassed by China, the UAE, Turkiye, and Lebanon).

According to Rudaw's report, the total capital in investments that Rosneft, Gazprom, and Lukoil have in Iraq and Kurdistan amounts to 14 billion USD. There are also visible plans for the expansion of Russia's activities in Iraq in the field of oil and gas (for example, in February 2024, Gazprom received approval from the Iraqi government to exploit the giant oil field in Nasiriyah, whose capacity is estimated at 4.36 billion barrels) and a tendency of displacement of the USA in this area by both Russia and China.

However, Russian-Iraqi trade exchange is negligible, and in 2022, imports from Russia amounted to only 283 million USD, while exports to Russia practically did not exist. The Russians are also not very present in other investment sectors beyond oil and gas, although in 2022 there were talks about potential cooperation regarding the construction of a new Iraqi nuclear reactor and food cooperation (in 2022, Iraq was to start buying more sunflower oil, wheat flour, and animal feed from Russia).

After the war with ISIS, the Russians entered Sunni areas (where there is no oil) with construction and industrial investments: modernization of a large glass and ceramics production plant in the city of Ramadi, in the Iraqi province of Anbar (it is supposed to create over a thousand jobs); in 2017, Russia also expressed readiness to support Iraq in the reconstruction of Mosul, although there is no information about specific actions in this regard.

China

Chinese investments are primarily present in the federal territories, although recently interest in Kurdistan has also been growing (in investment, trade, as well as diplomatic, informational, and cultural dimensions). China is a very important partner for Iraq, as Iraq has its largest trade turnover with this country (48 billion USD), with China alongside India being the main recipient of Iraqi oil (the value of Iraqi exports is 34 billion USD), while the structure of imports consists of various goods. The value of direct investments reached 34 billion USD in 2023, making China the largest investor in Iraq. China invests primarily in the oil sector but does not limit itself to it; in Iraq, including in Kurdistan, there are also companies from the telecommunications, high-tech, and construction sectors. Chinese companies are considered the greatest challenge

and competitor for Americans (while politically, China maintains a low profile and is decidedly more aggressive in creating influence through corruption). The most important Chinese companies operating in Iraqi oil fields include: China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), involved in the development of several oil fields including the Al-Ahdab field (Shiite Wasit governorate), whose extraction began in 2011 and which is a major project implemented in cooperation with the Iraqi government, as well as the Rumaila field (Basra); Sinopec operates mainly through partnerships with other companies to develop oil fields and also plays a role in oil infrastructure projects in the country; PetroChina, a subsidiary of CNPC Group, is involved in the development of the Halfaya field in the Shiite Maysan governorate and is also present in the West Qurna I fields (Basra); CPECC, a subsidiary of CNPC Group specializing in engineering and construction services in the oil and gas sector, handles infrastructure development projects for the Iraqi oil sector, including the construction of oil facilities and pipelines; ZB Oil Company (ZPEC) is a Chinese company engaged in drilling services and participates in providing drilling services and equipment to oil companies operating in Iraq.

China is also very active in other areas, and currently about 200 investment projects with a total value of 5 billion USD are planned in Iraq's federal territories. Huawei has also entered Iraq very aggressively, becoming the main partner of AsiaCell and other telecommunications companies in Iraq. Huawei also plans to build a solar power plant in Karbala, signed in 2024 an agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education on "smart education," participates in the digital transformation and e-governance of Iraqi ministries, in December 2023 signed a memorandum with the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission on cooperation in cybersecurity and resilience building, and also organizes various training and cultural projects.

However, it is worth noting that the last visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister to China took place in 2019 when the Prime Minister was the pro-Iranian Adel Abdul Mahdi (the delegation included a large number of ministers and governors of muhafaz). Soon after, anti-government protests broke out, and in Iraq, a conspiracy theory emerged that it was a U.S. retaliation aimed at blocking the development of China-Iraq relations. Neither the next Prime Minister, the pro-American Mustafa al-Kadhimi, nor the current Mohammad Shia al-Sudani (supported by pro-Iranian groups but trying to maintain a balance in relations with the USA) have gone to China so far. Nevertheless, there is visible further displacement of the USA by Chinese companies. For example, in May 2024, Chinese companies Zhongman Petroleum, Natural Gas Group, UEG, and Geo-Jade won 10 out of 13 contracts for exploration and exploitation of new oil and gas fields.

In 2022, Sudani signed an "oil for reconstruction" agreement with China (100,000 barrels per day), under which China was to carry out construction contracts in exchange for oil (previously negotiated by Prime Minister Abdel Mahdi in 2019). Under the agreement, the Chinese are to participate in the construction of 600 schools, Nasiriyah airport (370 million USD, to be carried out by China State Construction Engineering Corporation, the airport is expected to be ready in 2025), the Al-Badaa canal, as well as other projects related to water supply and sewage systems. Furthermore, China plans to build 90,000 homes in Baghdad's Sadr City (a Shiite poor neighborhood known for its support of Muqtada al-Sadr) and the Science City scientific town as part of the expansion of Hamdaniya University, about 30 km from Mosul. The "oil for reconstruction" deal also foresees China launching a line of credit up to 10 billion dollars for 20 years – expenditures from it are to be allocated, among others, to investments related to electric

power. This deal raises controversy due to a lack of transparency, notably because of doubts whether a fixed price was set, which would be disadvantageous for Iraq amid rising prices.

Also noteworthy is a memorandum signed in March 2024 by Hashed al-Shaabi (acting as an official governmental structure) concerning an agreement between Al-Muhandis company (created by Sudani's government in 2022 within Hashed al-Shaabi organizational structures) and Chinese CMEC. The agreement foresees joint projects in fields such as construction, engineering, trade, services, and energy.

Chinese interest in Kurdistan began with the opening of the Chinese consulate in Erbil in December 2014, although previously Chinese oil companies such as CNPC and Sinopec (since 2009) showed some activity in Kurdistan. In 2022, the KRG signed an agreement with Power China International Group for the construction of 4 dams in Kurdistan. Power China International Group also signed in 2023 an agreement with the Kurdish company Dabin Group (linked to the Barzani clan) for the construction of a cement plant and power plant in Erbil province (1,000 jobs) – the start of construction took place with the participation of Masrour Barzani and Dabin's head Aras Hussein Mirkhan (PDK politics closely related to the Barzanis). Other important Chinese partners in Kurdistan are Mellat Holding and Khoshnaw Group (in the wheat trade). Meanwhile, in 2024, the telecommunications company Korek, led by Sirwan Barzani (cousin of the prime minister and president of Kurdistan), replaced Ericsson with Huawei as strategic partner. In September 2024, the first smartphone factory in Iraq was opened in Erbil. It was to be established by an unidentified Kurdish businessman with Chinese assistance. The factory will produce smartphones of the Hong Kong brand Infinix, and announcements about its opening emphasized that Yazidis, survivors of the ISIS genocide, will work there.

Furthermore, in 2020, the Chinese signed an agreement with the KRG (in practice with the Barzanis) to build the "Happy City" tourist town worth 5 billion USD, covering an area of 2000 m², providing employment for 8,000 people. The first mentions of this project, important to the Barzanis, appeared in 2020 but satellite images do not confirm construction commencement. There were reports that this caused some tensions between China and the Barzanis due to China's failure to fulfill commitments but probably without serious consequences for China's influence. Another much smaller Chinese investment is SSAVELA MALL in Erbil, a joint venture of Didar Abdulqader and Jingo Chen, worth 13 million USD.

There is also information about the activity of the Chinese intelligence Guonbu in Kurdistan – officially it is supposed to be engaged in publishing and translating Chinese books into Kurdish, but its role is certainly greater and includes at least the control of Chinese citizens in Iraq. There are also reports that hackers working for Chinese intelligence in Iraq steal information from the USA, which is meant to serve the displacement of American influence in favor of Chinese influence. **In the Kurdistan Region, China is responsible for 49.06% of all investments.**

In November 2020, representatives of Iraqi political parties (including the Sadrist movement, representatives of the Badr organization, KDP and PUK) met online with a representative of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, declaring a willingness to promote the Belt and Road program and the role of China in the reconstruction of Iraq.

Iran

The influence of Iran on the Iraqi economy is enormous, and it results both from official economic relations and informal ones, including smuggling (including institutionalized smuggling). The most important tool of economic influence is the export of Iranian gas and electricity, on which Iraq is dependent. This allows Iran to weaponize these supplies but on the other hand, due to sanctions, Iran needs revenue from these sales. Moreover, Iran is also a significant trading partner (turnover about 11 billion USD), and Iranian construction companies are active in the Shiite south. Religious tourism from Iran is also of key importance for the Iraqi economy – it is practically the main source of income in provinces such as Karbala and Najaf. The state's income from religious tourism in Iraq is estimated at about 3–5 billion USD, but the impact on the economy is much larger – in 2019, pilgrim expenditures in Iraq (not only Iranians but they constitute the largest group) amounted to almost 11 billion USD, i.e., over 6% of Iraqi GDP, and during Arbaeen alone 16 million pilgrims arrived in Iraq.

Smuggling also has very great significance, with it being practically institutionalized in areas controlled by the Iraqi “muqawama” and handled by Shiite militias (in particular Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat al-Nujaba), which simultaneously control state institutions, including customs offices. Dollars are also smuggled to Iran. Channels of institutionalized smuggling also operate between the PUK-controlled part of Kurdistan and Iran (controlled by the Talabani family) and include, among others, oil transported by tankers to Iranian ports. According to various estimates, daily oil smuggling from Iraq to Iran is from 60,000 to even 200,000 barrels, and it is sold at half the market price.

Turkiye

Turkiye is a key trading partner of Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly the area controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK). It is also active in the federal territories, mainly in the construction sector, but rather not in the Shiite areas due to the negative attitude of pro-Iranian groups towards Türkiye. Officially, in terms of imports to Iraq, Türkiye ranks third after the UAE and China (13.7 billion USD), while exports to Türkiye officially amount to 1.3 billion USD but this does not include institutionalized smuggling, mainly of oil (estimated at around 200,000 barrels per day generating about 200 million USD monthly), conducted in agreement between the Barzani clan and Turkish authorities. Türkiye was the main recipient (or transit location) of Kurdish oil until exports were stopped due to Baghdad's actions. Economic relations primarily give Türkiye influence over the Barzani family. At the federal level, in April 2024, after the Erdogan-Sudani meeting, there was talk of increasing trade turnover to 24 billion USD. Outside Kurdistan and Baghdad, Türkiye is also very active in Nineveh and Kirkuk, as well as in Basra. Türkiye is the third-largest investor in the Kurdistan Region, implementing 15 projects, which is 12.3% of all foreign investments.

Arab states

Relations between Iraq and Sunni Arab states after 2003 were influenced by these states' dissatisfaction with the rise to power of the Shiites. Nevertheless, currently the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are important economic partners of Iraq, although their actions are not coordinated among themselves, and these states build competitive spheres of influence. The

UAE was the earliest to normalize its relations with Iraq (2009) and conducts very intensive activities as well as lobbying. The Emirates have always had particularly close relations with the PDK in Kurdistan. In Kurdistan, the Emirates are the second largest investor responsible for 25% of FDI (five Emirati companies invested 2.5 billion USD, and the trade exchange is about 3 billion USD annually), while Lebanon ranks fourth (10%). One of the key Emirati entities investing in Kurdistan is Dana Gas Company, which exploits the Khor Mor gas fields (mainly for internal use in Kurdistan) in the Chamchamal area (territories controlled by the PUK). The Emirates also invest in real estate (Emaar Properties) and agriculture in Kurdistan and are importers of agricultural products from Kurdistan (particularly potatoes). Kurdistan is also negotiating Emirati investments in renewable energy (Masdar company). The Emirates are also an important partner at the federal level, although their investments there mainly concern Baghdad (many construction and infrastructure investments), while they rather do not enter Shiite areas. In Iraq's import structure, the Emirates are the largest partner responsible for 31.5%, and with trade turnover at about 25 billion USD, are one of Iraq's most important partners. Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the previous prime minister, was particularly favorable to the Emirates, while pro-Iranian groups have a negative attitude toward the UAE. Besides the embassy in Baghdad, the UAE also has a consulate in Erbil.

Saudi Arabia plays a significantly smaller role in Iraq, partly because normalization of relations happened only in 2017 (and the opening of its consulate in Kurdistan only in 2019), and pro-Iranian groups have a negative attitude toward the kingdom, which limits its ability to operate. In 2023, Saudi exports to Iraq amounted to 1.3 billion USD, while imports were practically non-existent. However, under Sudani's government, Saudi investments began to increase, and in 2023 this country invested 5 billion USD in construction and the real estate market. Further investments could come if the "Dry Canal" project from the Persian Gulf to Türkiye is realized.

Qatar has even less significance in Iraq because it was negatively perceived by Iraqi Shiites as responsible for supporting anti-Shiite jihadists. However, the situation has changed significantly, as Qatar strongly supports Hamas, which is also supported by Iran. Qatar opened its embassy in Baghdad only in 2015 and its consulate in Erbil in 2024; trade exchange is still negligible. Nevertheless, the situation began to change after the visit of the Emir of Qatar to Baghdad in June 2023, when investment agreements worth 9 billion USD were signed.

The West

American, British, French, and Italian companies have their share in the oil industry as well as in other investment projects. However, at the beginning of 2024, Iraq saw the departure of the most important American entity, namely Exxon. Still active in the oil industry are, among others, BP, Eni, and Total, as well as Halliburton, Schlumberger, Baker Hughes, and Occidental Petroleum. Furthermore, the USA is trying to lead Iraq to achieve energy independence (thus becoming independent from the import of gas and electricity from Iran), and General Electric plays a huge role in this regard. The USA is also the third largest importer of Iraqi oil (10.3 billion USD), but imports from the USA are below 1 billion. European countries also do not have significant trade exchange with Iraq (the largest import from Europe is from Germany – worth 1.1 billion USD, while EU countries collectively receive about 17% of Iraqi oil exports).

5.2 Humanitarian

The greatest humanitarian activity in Iraq is demonstrated by European institutions, particularly Germany, whose organizations are very visible, as well as the USA, which has spent 3.5 billion USD on humanitarian projects in Iraq since 2014. Western institutions have operated primarily in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Nineveh province, and other Sunni areas, while to a much lesser extent in Shiite areas, where Iran and related institutions were mainly active. One of the key humanitarian institutions in Kurdistan is the Barzani Charity Foundation, which identifies France, the UAE, and Kuwait as its partners, as well as American, German, Emirati, Kuwaiti, and Swiss institutions. Outside of Western institutions, the UAE is also the most visible humanitarian aid provider in Iraq.

China and Russia were not very active in humanitarian aid for IDPs during and after the war with ISIS. In 2014, information appeared about Russia sending 40 tons of aid, but this was not significant relative to the then needs and in comparison with the engagement of Western and Arab organizations. Nevertheless, both countries try to develop their influence through other projects. For example, China provided aid during Covid-19 (masks, disinfectants, etc.). The Chinese oil company HBP delivered 5,400 test kits and 30,000 masks to one of Kurdistan's main charitable organizations, the Barzani Charity Foundation. China invests heavily in soft power in Iraq, particularly in Kurdistan, where, among others, 7 universities (private and public) have signed partnership agreements with China. Furthermore, they finance local NGOs, invite journalists on study visits and training in China, etc., while simultaneously blocking any attempts at contacts between Kurdistan and Taiwan. Huawei's Academies of Information and Communication Technology offer courses and certificates at the Lebanese-French University (LFU), Garmyan University, Dohuk University, Sulaymaniyah Polytechnic, and Salahaddin University. In addition to offering training and awarding certificates, the company hosts the Huawei ICT Competition. The Chinese are also very active in the media area in Kurdistan, cooperating with, among others, Rudaw and Kurdistan24 TV stations, financing training and trips to China for journalists, and the Chinese consul visits the editorial offices of these media. China also finances the Chawi Kurd Center, which is presented as a "civil society organization" and is quite an important institution in Kurdistan. The Chinese consulate in Erbil financed the Kurdish translation of President Xi Jinping's book *The Governance of China*, which was published by Chawi Kurd. Chinese influence in Chawi particularly reflects in the ideological character of publications, e.g., attacking "neoliberalism in the USA and Europe". The Chinese consulate in Erbil also runs a Facebook page "China in Kurdish language". Cooperation with China correlates with the increasingly worsening situation in Kurdistan regarding democracy and human rights, including press freedom, due to the authoritarian tendencies of the Barzani and Talabani families.

The Russians also offer educational projects to Iraqis, including Kurds, including scholarships in Russia (for example, in September Kutrashvili announced the funding of 70 scholarships for Kurdish students to study in Russia). Some activity is also conducted in Iraq by the Regional Social Fund named after the Hero of Russia Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov, led by Ramzan Kadyrov's mother, but it has been limited to assistance to Chechen prisoners in Iraq (imprisoned for supporting ISIS). Furthermore, in July 2024, the Russian Ministry of Health offered assistance in creating a network of diagnostic centers meant for the rapid diagnosis and treatment of cancers, modeled after the effective Russian system. Additionally, Russia proposes

organizing trainings and technology transfers, such as proton therapy, which supports the development of Iraqi medical infrastructure and specialized staff. However, Russia's activities in this area, unlike the efforts of European and American actors, have a more propagandistic dimension than one of real assistance.

5.3 Religious

Iraq is a Muslim country, but it is also home to religious minorities, primarily Christians. A key significance lies in the division between Sunnis and Shiites, as well as the activity of the Sufi brotherhood Qadiriyya. The issue of Shiite identity is discussed separately; on the other hand, Saudi Arabia, other Arab countries, and to some extent Türkiye use religious institutions to influence Sunnis. However, the idea of Muslim unity in the form of a pan-Islamist project is not popular even among Sunnis. Anti-Shiite jihadism, characteristic of ISIS, was discredited by the 2014-2017 war with ISIS, and playing on these sentiments has been abandoned by states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Russia tries to present itself as a friend of Muslims and a state where Islam is part of the identity, portraying the West as Islamophobic—using narratives about migrants (an example of such action was Belarusian disinformation broadcast on main news in Iraq in 2022 alleging that Belarus provided "evidence" of the killing of Iraqi migrants by the Polish military—later denied by Iraqi authorities, though the denial had less reach)—and creating the impression that the "collective West" supports Israel. In this context, widely circulated legends are notable, for example, that Putin comes from Iraq and is actually named Abdul Amir Abu Tin, and his father was a Shiite fig seller (in Arabic a fig is "tin"). Furthermore, Russia may exploit ties between the Kadyrov family and the Qadiriyya Sufi brotherhood (the Kadyrovs belong to the Sufi current that emerged from the introduction of Qadiriyya to the Caucasus in the 19th century; Ahmed Kadyrov visited Iraq at least once; moreover, the teachings of the leader of the Iraqi Qadiriyya current were propagated in Chechnya by Adam Deniyev, who became a "friend" of Akhmat Kadyrov and an opponent of Dzhokhar Dudayev). In 2016, a Muslim conference was held in Grozny, during which a controversial fatwa was issued stating that "Salafis and Wahhabis are heretics." This caused significant discussion in the Sunni world and support from Shiites, who at that time accused the Wahhabi-Salafi current of supporting ISIS and responsibility for massacres of Shiites. Representatives of Iraq also participated in this conference. However, in 2017 Ramzan Kadyrov publicly condemned Chechen supporters of the leader of the main Iraqi Qadiriyya brotherhood Kasnazani and criticized its representative in Russia—Aslanbek Zubarayev. The reason was a video in which young Chechen followers of this Sufi sect mutilated themselves with knives they stabbed into their heads. Zubarayev was publicly called a charlatan by the chief Chechen mufti, although the influence of the Kasnazani order in Chechnya survived. Furthermore, after 2003, the Naksbandi order linked to the former close collaborator of Saddam Hussein (with whom Russia maintained good relations until the end), Izzat al-Douri, appeared in the Iraqi Sufi current. He supported ISIS against the Baghdad government but later became a target of ISIS persecution for doctrinal reasons. There is some potential here for Russian activity, as circles sympathizing with Saddam view Russia's role positively, but there is no data confirming Russia's use of this.

After the war with ISIS, Kadyrov effectively negotiated with Iraqi authorities the return of imprisoned wives and children of ISIS terrorists who came to Iraq and Syria from Russia. Since 2021, Russia's ambassador to Iraq has been the very capable diplomat Elbrus Kutrashvili, who is from Chechnya, is Muslim, and as Ramzan Kadyrov himself expressed, comes from a "very respected family." However, it does not seem that Qadiriyya can be described as Russian assets in Iraq (nor could it become such in the future), although potentially Russia may have some influence there through Kadyrov's people (especially Kutrashvili). The current leader of Kasnazani Sheikh Nehro has good contacts in Europe and the USA (including with the Trump environment), where, according to Iraqi reports, he has significant financial assets. Nonetheless, the order diversifies its contacts and, for example, its local branch in Suleimaniyah has good relations with Iran.

Russia can also influence Muslims in Iraq through its project "Group of Strategic Vision 'Russia – Islamic World', whose goal is strengthening cooperation with the Muslim world including through the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Russia can also influence Christian communities in Iraq, exploiting the impression it created that during the civil war in Syria it supported Christians. Russia influences, among others, the Assyrian Church of the East, whose patriarch Mar Awa III, although he has nothing to do with Orthodoxy, maintains good relations with the Russian patriarch Kirill, has visited Russia twice, and in 2023 received an order from Putin. This is all the more interesting as Mar Awa III was born in the USA, yet his contacts with Russians and support for the Russian narrative, including regarding Ukraine, is very clear.

5.4 Geopolitics and security

The pro-Iranian “muqawama,” also called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, is on one hand part of the Hashed al-Shaabi, functioning within the structures of Iraqi security, and on the other hand part of the pro-Iranian “axis of resistance,” which also includes Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Houthis, and (until recently) Syria. In 2024, in Baghdad, the Houthis and Hamas opened their official representations, and the “muqawama” conducts increasingly frequent attacks on US bases and on Israel. Although previously there were tactical alliances of the muqawama with the PKK, with Iran’s approval, currently Kataib Hezbollah increasingly attacks the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). One cannot rule out that a tactical alliance of the PKK and SDF with Israel has occurred or may occur. The “muqawama” is heavily armed by Iran and is its main instrument in Iraq, although this is not a strict dependency but rather a community of interests, ideology, goals, Shiite identity, etc. Nevertheless, the Iraqi “muqawama” often shows less pragmatism than Iran. On the other hand, people like Kais al-Chazali have too much to lose, as they are beneficiaries of the current governing arrangement in Iraq. This also suits Iran, because through Iraq’s relations with the US and its influence in Iraq it has channels to circumvent sanctions. Iran is also interested in intensifying communication between Iraq and Iran, and more broadly between Iran and the Mediterranean Sea via Iraq and Syria. Currently, a railway is being built from the Iranian Salamcheh to Basra, which will allow connection of the Baghdad–Basra railway line with the well-developed railway line in Iran (via Abadan). Iran is interested in creating a rail-road connection (as well as energy transmission and arms transport) that would go through Basra and Baghdad to Al Bukamal and further through Deir az-Zaur to Latakia, Aleppo, and Damascus, and further to Tripoli and Beirut (after Assad’s fall this ceased to be realistic, and Iran’s geopolitical plans for now have fallen apart). This project was mentioned, among others, by President Rouhani in 2021, as well as by the head of Iranian railways Sajed Rasuli in 2018. However, this route requires Iranian lobbying among Sunni tribes in Iraqi Anbar and Syrian Deir az-Zaur, which Iran is indeed doing. This project is also in China’s interest as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, but so far there have been no Chinese actions supporting this project. There is also an alternative route that would go through Kirkuk and Mosul to Aleppo, but this route is currently blocked by the SDF (Syrian Kurds allied with the US).

Increasing Chinese activity in Iraq may also cause Iraq to join BRICS. The INA agency quoted on October 11, 2024, Prime Minister Sudani’s statement on Iraq’s readiness to join BRICS, but ultimately he did not participate in the last BRICS summit in Kazan, and Ambassador Kutraszew claimed that Iraq is interested in joining BRICS but the US is trying to block Iraq’s entry into BRICS. The pro-Iranian forces in Iraq are openly in favor of joining BRICS, but it can be assumed that China, increasing its influence in Kurdistan, also convinces the Kurds, especially the PDK, to do so. However, it can be expected that Assad’s downfall in Syria and the increased pressure on Iran, currently on the defensive, will inhibit the deepening of Iraq’s involvement in Chinese projects including BRICS.

The main competing project is the "Dry Canal" project, which is promoted by Türkiye and supported by Arab states, as well as the EU. It is supposed to connect the Persian Gulf with Europe through Iraq and Türkiye. The project involves the construction of a new border crossing outside the control of Kurdistan (the current and only crossing at Ibrahim Khalil is in Kurdish territories and the road leads through Kurdistan, which is connected with disputes about customs fees). The corridor, which would include a road, railway line, and a new pipeline, would bypass the Kurdistan Region and go through Mosul to Baghdad (with a pipeline connection to Kirkuk) and further through Najaf to Basra and the new port of Al Faw. This project is to be completed by 2038 and cost about 20 billion USD. At the same time, the USA is trying to increase cooperation between Iraq and Arab countries in power production (this concerns especially Jordan) and gas import (instead of from Iran).

The Kurdish issue plays a key role in geopolitical projects concerning Iraq, but Kurds in Iraq are divided into at least three interest groups: PDK (pro-Turkish orientation), PUK (maneuvering but having poor relations with Türkiye and currently aligned with Iran and Baghdad), and PKK (Kandil) conducting war against Türkiye and open to tactical alliances. The presence of the PKK in Iraq (in the Kurdistan territory and in Nineveh in the Sinjar area) causes Turkish airstrikes and a military presence of Türkiye in areas controlled by PKK, which provokes dissatisfaction among some pro-Iranian Shiite groups, especially those linked to Kais al-Chazali, who is very anti-Turkish. On the other hand, Kurdish groups from Iran are also present in Kurdistan, which Iran accuses of terrorism and has conducted airstrikes against. This issue also caused two bombings of Erbil by the Sepah, which proved to be an effective instrument of pressure on the PDK, which, seeing that the USA is unable to stop these attacks and will not retaliate against Iran for them, decided to comply with Iran's demands. The threat of shelling of Erbil is therefore an effective tool of Iranian pressure on Erbil, and besides that, the Peshmerga does not have the capacity to defend against a potential attack by the muqawama, which is significantly stronger.

Numerous PMCs operate in Iraq, mainly American and British, but Russian ones are also present, although they have not been engaged in combat operations. One such Russian PMC is the PMC Yastreb, about whose activity in Iraq little is known but probably amounts to protection. Another company is Antiterror-Oriel, which is involved, among others, in the protection of some Iraqi power plants and was present in Iraq already during Saddam Hussein's time and returned in 2014 after the ISIS attack on Iraq. Currently, it has probably been absorbed by PMC Redut, founded by Sergey Isakov—who in the 1990s was involved in illegal trade of Iraqi oil and contacts between Saddam Hussein and Russian politicians. However, there is no precise information on how active Russian PMCs still are in Iraq, and to what extent they have transferred their forces to Ukraine. One of the largest security companies in Russia, the LUKOM-A Agency, is involved in protecting oil infrastructure, probably the West Qurna-2 oil field. Another group that operated in Iraq was Moran Security Group, but there is no confirmation whether it is still active there.

Furthermore, Chinese security services Guoanbu are active in Kurdistan, which, as part of expanding their role and courting the local intelligence as well as gaining access to regional decision-makers, plan to establish a media company that will translate Chinese books into Kurdish in order to reach a wider audience.

Russia is increasingly entering Iraq in terms of military and security cooperation. The beginnings of this cooperation date back to Prime Minister Maliki's visit to Moscow in October 2012, where he signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation, including supplies of anti-aircraft missiles, helicopters, and other weapons. In 2014, Russia delivered Su-25s to Iraq, which involved training Iraqi pilots in Moscow. Another strengthening of Russian influence was the creation of an anti-terrorism center in Baghdad, coordinating cooperation between Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Russia in this regard. Although during the war with ISIS the role of this center was limited, in subsequent years it began to grow. In 2018, the Russians played a certain role in the opening of the border crossing at Al-Qaim.

Furthermore, Iraq and Russia recently signed a cooperation agreement in 2024 in the field of maritime transport, aimed at facilitating the flow of goods and passengers through seaports. Talks are also underway between Iraq and Russia regarding multilateral cooperation within the framework of the North-South transport corridor. In 2024, an air services agreement was also signed between the two countries to strengthen cooperation in the transportation sector and develop air communication between the two states (which may stimulate the migration route, especially since talks are also ongoing regarding visa-free movement).

The expansion into the Iraqi market was also initiated by the Russian arms industry—starting with the opening of service lines, ultimately leading to the launch of joint production lines in the near future.

More dynamically developing, however, are informal relations between Russia and the muqawama, largely due to the intensive activities of Ambassador Kutashev. In 2024, he proposed to Iraq that Russia would submit to the Security Council a draft resolution condemning American airstrikes on Hashed al-Shaabi, which was an expression of deepening relations between Russia and the muqawama. Kutashev regularly visits militia leaders (including politicians such as Kais al-Chazali), and in these meetings, military influence is coordinated in exchange for concessions granted to these factions in terms of arms contracts and informal imports of equipment and missiles from Russia. In some areas liberated from ISIS and controlled by Hashed al-Shaabi, Russian factories producing missiles have appeared (bearing in mind that Hashed al-Shaabi is financed from the Iraqi state budget). Cooperation is also developing in the propaganda sphere, for example, in April 2023 a social media channel named Sabereen News published a song supporting the Russian mercenary group "Wagner," using terminology and symbolism close to Iraqi Shiites. However, Russia's inability to defend Assad from collapse in Syria and the emergence of information indicating Russia's sabotage of Iranian activities in Syria (and thus also the Iraqi muqawama) may negatively affect its credibility in the eyes of the muqawama, leading to a loosening of relations.

5.5 Ideology

A key tool of ideological influence of Iran in Iraq is the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and the system of "velayat-e faqih." In 1982, in exile in Iran, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq was established under the leadership of Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, which sought to introduce a system in Iraq similar to that functioning in Iran, with al-Hakim as the Supreme Leader. However, after al-Hakim was assassinated by Al-Qaeda (or according to another version – by Sadr) in 2006, the organization changed its name to the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq, abandoned the plan to introduce an "Islamic republic" in Iraq, and lost its dominant position in the Shiite political spectrum in Iraq. Nevertheless, some Shiite groups, especially the political representation of the so-called "muqawama," i.e., the pro-Iranian components of Hashed al-Shaabi, remain under the influence of this ideology and as their religious authority recognize rather Khomeini and Khamenei than Iraqi marjas. This particularly concerns the following groups: Asaib Ahl al Haq and its political representation, i.e., the Al Sadiqoun bloc, holding 17 seats in parliament and led by Sheikh Kais al-Chazali; Kataib Hezbollah, which has a more dispersed structure (leader Ali al-Hamidawi); Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (leader Akram al-Kaabi), Kataib Sajid al-Shuhada, Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya; to a lesser extent this concerns the Badr Organization associated with the Fatah bloc, led by Hadi al-Ameri, which has considerable influence in the Iraqi Ministry of Interior.

Pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism have lost their popularity, and pan-Arabism can be a tool of influence for Sunni Arab states only to a very limited extent with respect to some Sunnis (however, the appeal to Arab identity is a separate issue and will be discussed later). Historically, pan-Arabism existed in two versions: Nasserist (which disappeared with Nasser's death) and Baathist, which in Iraq is associated with Saddam Hussein and officially condemned. The fall of Assad in Syria also means the ultimate end of Baathism, although earlier the fact that Assad relied on Iran meant that Syria under his rule could not play on pan-Arabism. Certain sentiments in this regard may, however, be used by Russia in its FIMI activities, referring to the fact that it supported Saddam until the end and that the West overthrew him. Russia must, however, do this with sensitivity to to whom it addresses itself, as such a narrative may alienate Shiites and Kurds. The ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood has retained some popularity, with two groups associated with it: the Arab Islamic Party of Iraq and the Kurdish Islamic Union. It is worth emphasizing that when in the 1960s the Islamist trend was born in Iraq, relations between Shiite Islamists from the Dawa Party (from which also comes Prime Minister Sudani and former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki) and Sunni Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Party of Iraq were very good (which leaves some opening for Iran to influence these Sunni and Kurdish environments – in fact, the Kurdish Islamic Union is not anti-Iranian, while although the Islamic Party of Iraq has lost significance, Iran has influence on the Sunni Al Azem bloc of Khamis al-Khanjar through Qatar, which is Khanjar's main ally and at the same time has close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood).

Iraq is susceptible to an anti-democratic narrative spread by centers such as Russia, Iran, and potentially also China and others. It is based on associating democracy with the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent occupation, which for many Iraqis is associated with the "destruction of Iraq." Furthermore, Russia and Iran try to discredit "Western democracy" by attributing to it responsibility for Israel's actions, which are unacceptable to the overwhelming majority of Iraqis. However, in the propaganda of pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, attacks mainly concern the USA and

possibly Great Britain, while the attitude toward other European countries is not unequivocally negative. Moreover, they criticize rather “American imposition of democracy” and not democracy as such, since Shiite groups are beneficiaries of the introduction of democracy, and the introduction of an Islamic republic according to the Iranian model is currently unrealistic. Russia, followed by Islamic currents, especially (but not only) Shiite pro-Iranian ones, also use the narrative of the “moral degeneration” of the West, presenting itself as defending the same values, which are also close to Islam, and which are allegedly threatened by the West (e.g., the LGBT issue, etc.).

Communism has some popularity in Iraq. The Iraqi Communist Party was historically very strong, and in 2018 it formed an alliance with Muqtada as-Sadr. It also has a considerable media base. The Iraqi Communist Party maintains certain contacts with Russian communists and also has a branch in Moscow operating there within the Iraqi diaspora. However, there are no grounds to state that Iraqi communists constitute a Russian tool, although their connections with the global radical left may favor the spreading of pro-Russian narratives in these circles. On the other hand, the Apoist ideology (referring to the PKK leader Öcalan) has some popularity in Kurdistan, but this ideology is not permanently linked to any external state actor, although the PKK enters into tactical alliances. It also has no influence among non-Kurdish, particularly Arab, residents of Iraq.

5.6 Identity

In Iraq, there is an overlapping of various identities, which leads to the hybridization of Iraqi identity, filling it with different contents. It can be said that there is sectarian competition for the Iraqi national identity between Sunnis and Shiites, while for all Iraqis, except the Kurds, it has key importance, regardless of its different understandings. It should be remembered that some concepts in the Arab-Muslim world in general, and in Iraq in particular, are understood differently than in Europe. First, there is a dual understanding of nationalism – al-qaumiyya (referring to ethnonationalism, thus pan-Arab nationalism but also Kurdish nationalism – Greater Kurdistan) and al-wataniyya (referring to state nationalism, Iraqi nationalism, regardless of ethnic or religious divisions). Second, religion shapes identity to a much greater extent. This especially concerns endogamous ethno-religious groups such as, for example, Yazidis, for whom it is difficult to separate religious and ethnic identity, which causes disputes about who they are (e.g., Kurds consider Yazidis a religious minority but ethnic Kurds, which, however, is a disputed issue). Moreover, although the concept of sectarianism arouses emotions, sectarian identity (or more broadly – ethno-sectarian) is a fact, whereas it is not opposed to national identity (wataniyya), while al-qaumiyya nationalism has much less influence on Shiites. Also, tribal identity is not opposed to other forms of identity, i.e., both sectarian and national, with tribal identity playing a much greater role among Sunnis.

Shiite identity is a key factor in creating the area of Iranian influence. Although among Shiites there is a significant part that is anti-Iranian (in particular the youth who participated in the so-called tishreen anti-government protests, as well as communists) or at least opposes excessive political influence of Iran in Iraq (e.g., the Sadrists), Iran has many soft power instruments to influence the Shiites. This results especially from the fact that both in Iraq and in Iran there are Shiite pilgrimage sites, in particular the mausoleums in Karbala (Imam Hussein), Najaf (Imam Ali and the seat of the hawza), Baghdad (Kadhimiya), and Samarra (Al Askari), and in Iran the mausoleum of Imam Reza in Mashhad. This means considerable pilgrimage tourism between the two countries (in both directions, though it mainly concerns millions of Iranian pilgrims annually coming to Iraq, especially during the Ashura and Arbaeen holidays). Setting aside the religious and economic aspects of these pilgrimages, they also lead to intensive interpersonal contacts, which also favor cognitive and identity influence. These pilgrimages are also accompanied by special rituals, including collective reenactments (elegies) conducted by special chanters who, in their composed poetic works, often also refer to current events. In this context, it is worth noting that this may be used not only by Iran but also by Russia. Although there is no large Shiite community in Russia, there is still considerable room for manipulation here. For example, at one ceremony in honor of Imam Hussein, conducted by Bassam al-Karbala'i in Karbala, the Russian ambassador Kutrashev participated. The paradox is that the USSR, and later Russia, supported Saddam Hussein, which is very poorly used to dismantle Russian influence among Shiites. In the context of Iranian influence, it is also worth remembering that the institution of marjas (the highest Shiite clerics) is not related to any territorial administration and Shiites in Iraq may recognize the authority of marjas in Iran (especially Khomeini and Khamenei), while Iranians may recognize the authority of Iraqi marjas, although currently none of the three Iraqi marjas is a native Iraqi. This particularly concerns the most important authority, i.e., Ali al-Sistani, who is Iranian, which, however, does not mean that he is a tool of Iran (quite the opposite, as Sistani rejects the doctrine of velayat-e faqih in the form in which it functions in Iran). This state of affairs is a consequence of the fact that the

hawza in Najaf is a key center of Shiite religious education. This also causes that for many key Shiite families it is difficult to determine their ethnic origin. For example, the Sadrs originate from Lebanon, but in the 20th century various branches of this family circulated between Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Also, the Al Hakim family comes from Iran, from where it came to Iraq in the 17th century. Moreover, some families have mixed Iranian-Iraqi origin (e.g., the field commander of Al-Hashed al-Shaabi Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed in 2020). After the 1920 revolution, as well as during Saddam Hussein's rule, many Shiite families considered of Iranian origin were expelled from Iraq, and some of them, e.g., the Larijani family, later became influential in Iran, which also constitutes an area of influence. It should also be remembered that Shiites in Iraq are not only Arabs but also about 40% of Iraqi Turkmens and a certain percentage of Kurds, which gives Iran the possibility to exert influence on them as well (especially since Iran supported them in the war against ISIS, which carried out genocide against Shiites).

Arab identity is a key instrument of influence of Sunni Arab states on Iraqis in general, and on Shiites in particular (influence on Sunnis takes place through other channels, i.e., especially in opposition to Shiite identity as an Iranian tool and through tribal ties). It is worth recalling that the appeal to Arab identity (in confrontation with the Iranian one) caused that although the majority of soldiers during the Iran-Iraq war were Shiites, there were no mass defections. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Sunni states initially had a negative attitude toward contacts with Iraq, trying to destabilize the situation and counting on the fall of Shiite governments and the return of Sunni domination. However, experiences with ISIS caused a change in approach, and from about 2017 both the UAE and Saudi Arabia began to try to influence Shiite circles by appealing to Arab unity, which was a significantly more effective policy. A key instrument of this policy is Muqtada as-Sadr, who is at odds with pro-Iranian groups. Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq as-Sadr, at the beginning of the 1990s, was appointed by Saddam Hussein as a counterbalance to Iraqi Shiite leaders residing in exile. It turned out, however, that he was uncontrollable, and in the end Saddam ordered his assassination, but before that happened he was targeted by exile Shiite circles' attacks, and moreover promoted Shiism combined with Iraqi and Arab nationalism, in opposition to Iran. Muqtada himself paid a visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017, which was considered a breakthrough in relations between the Saudis and Iraqi Shiites. Arab identity is also associated with Saddam Hussein, to whom some Iraqis still refer, and this allows Russia to build influence in this segment (based on the narrative that it opposed the 2003 war).

Kurdish identity does not constitute a very broad field for external influence due to the lack of a Kurdish state entity. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that both in Iran and in Türkiye there are groups of assimilated Kurds supporting the state policy. In particular, of Kurdish origin is Hakan Fidan, former head of the MIT intelligence services, and currently the head of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, Russia also uses the relatively numerous Kurdish diaspora in Russia to influence Iraqi Kurdistan, especially for intelligence activities and creating influence. In this context, Russia also uses Mustafa Barzani's stay in the USSR in the years 1946–1958.

Tribal identity – although most tribes have a cross-border dimension, tribes as such are not a platform for political influence from outside. Moreover, the political role of tribes has greatly weakened in recent years (in favor of parties possessing militias).

Turkish influence – the main area of Turkiye's identity influence is the Turkmen in Iraq, particularly the Iraqi Turkmen Front (Irak Türkmen Cephesi) and institutions and media related to the Turkmen minority. However, the war with ISIS caused deep divisions between Shiite Turkmen (who joined the pro-Iranian Hashed al-Shaabi forces) and Sunni Turkmen (especially in Tel Afar in Nineveh, where many of them murdered their Shiite neighbors, and some reached high positions in ISIS). At that time, Turkiye primarily supported Sunni Turkmen, which caused some Shiite Turkmen, especially from areas occupied by ISIS, to stop seeing Turkiye as their patron. Turkiye also has the potential for identity influence on the Kurds, although this depends on Turkiye's current policy regarding the Kurdish issue (Erdogan and the AKP show variability and flexibility in this area, and there are many assimilated Kurds within the AKP ranks).

Israeli influence in Kurdistan – although formally any relations with Israel are banned in Iraq, and calling for normalization of relations with Israel is punishable by life imprisonment, there are certain Kurdish-Israeli relations based on identity. In Israel, there live about 150,000 to 300,000 Kurdish Jews, whose Jewish identity is strongly linked with Kurdish identity. Additionally, a significant number of them descend from the Barzani tribal areas (there is a Jewish branch of this tribe in Israel), which further influences the relations between Israel and the ruling PDK in Kurdistan, thereby creating a platform for Israeli influence on Kurdistan.

CHAPTER 6. Key FIMI resources in Iraq and their attribution

6.1 Companies

Connected with China in Iraq are:

- Iraqi-Chinese Business Council (Haidar al-Rubaie)

Connected with China in Kurdistan are:

- **SSAVELA MALL** in Erbil, a joint investment of Didar Abdulqader and Jingo Chen, valued at 13 million USD.
- **Dabin Group** (Aras Husejn Mirchan, Izzedine Berwari);
- **Mellat Holding** (Chairman of the Board - Haji Idrees Surchi, CEO - Luqman Surchi, and General Manager - Jegr Surchi: mellatholding.com. The company has its own charitable institution - Idrees Charity (idreescharity.org), founded in 2014, dealing among others with health, education, and support for people with disabilities. The face of the Foundation is Haji Idrees Surchi, a London-based philanthropist conducting extensive charitable activities, closely linked to the Barzanis;
- **Khoshnaw Group**, founded in 1983 by Ghafoor Majid Khoshnawa, one of the richest people in Kurdistan (in 2024 sued in the USA by a group of 5000 people, represented by the American NGO - Kurdistan Victims Fund for murders, torture, arson, theft, drug trafficking, etc.). Reviewing import-export registers, one can come across data suggesting that Khoshnaw Company imports cigarettes to Iraq and another unidentified country through companies "Ltd Jti Donskoy Tabak" / "Jsc Don's Tobacco," belonging to JT International and located in Russia. However, this is not illegal by itself and is a marginal percentage of Khoshnaw shipping lists, which mainly imports electronics from Southeast Asia. This shows, however, that Khoshnaw also does business with Russians. Leading among the Khoshnaw Group brands is the company "from wheat," established in 2020, DAS Food - they reportedly own the largest silos in Iraq, also among the top 4 silos in the Middle East. The founder and CEO of DAS Food is Mohammed Ghafoor Majid Khoshnaw, son of the founder of Khoshnaw Group. It is precisely in the area of grain trade that Khoshnaw cooperates with the Chinese.

Russian

- The Russian-Iraqi Business Council cooperates with the Iraqi Federation of Chambers of Commerce (frequent meetings but mainly aimed at encouraging entrepreneurs from Russia to invest in Iraq). In October 2022, the Russian-Iraqi Business Forum was held in Moscow, attended by more than 100 companies from Iraq and Russia. From Iraq, among others: Abdurazzak Al-Zuheiri – President of the Federation of Iraqi Chambers of Commerce, Ali Warid – Director of the Technical Department of the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, Abbas Salim Hussein – Director of the Livestock Development Department of the Ministry of Agriculture; Aziz Nadim Al-Isa – Director of the Industrial Development Department of the Ministry of Industry.

6.2 NGOs

Russian House in Iraq - director Alak Ali Mohammed al-Chalidi, so far this institution has not organized any major event and does not have its own website but is involved in many smaller initiatives, including organizing meetings of various Russian delegations with scientific, cultural, and religious institutions in Iraq, e.g., a university delegation visit in Russia to the shrine of Ali in Najaf (<https://holyfatawa.com/news/read/7316>); such activities, however, can very effectively and softly influence the acceptance of the Russian perception by important institutions and individuals.

The Russian House has also established cooperation with the publishing department "Al-Mamun" at the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Antiquities of Iraq. Recently, the publishing house has translated into Arabic and printed several Russian books, including about Vladimir Putin, about Christian values, and even a legal code. Parallel to this project, a collection of historical facts about Iraq and its cultural activists was published in Russian.

Ali Mohammed Al Barghash, president of the Association for International Cooperation and Preservation of the Arabic Language, participated in the opening of the Russian House and expressed support there for Russia in confrontation with the West. He is also the owner of the company Students without Borders in Russia.

In March 2024, a delegation of the Rudaw Research Center (including director Zirvana Rojhelti)—an analytical center affiliated with Rudaw TV—visited Moscow (at the Russian Multipolarity and Russophile Forum), including meetings with Dugin and Zakharova. After this visit, a number of articles favorable to Russia were published by Rojhelti.

The Chawi Kurd Center, active in Iraqi Kurdistan and under very strong influence of China (both in institutional cooperation and promoting Chinese ideology), is headed by Mashchal Kaulusy, a Kurdish writer and researcher known for analysis and commentary on politics and national issues in Kurdistan. Associated with this organization are also Kazhan Abdullah, a Kurdish writer and political researcher actively publishing analyses on political, social, and economic issues related to the Kurdistan region. He is the author of numerous articles on platforms such as Chawi Kurd Center for Political Development and Kurdish Globe; as well as Mohsen Ali Razayee, Ismail Abdullah, Hogir Nerwayi, a journalist and editor affiliated with Kurdistan Press portal, and Khalil Jangi, a Kurdish writer dealing with political, social, and historical topics.

6.3 Religious leaders

The Iraqi hawza in Najaf (Shiite leadership) is not susceptible to external political influences. Moreover, it observes the principle of quietism, i.e., non-engagement in politics. Besides, the very influential al-Khoei family in the hawza conducts very active religious and financial activities in London, where the al-Khoei Foundation was established. There are indeed influential clerics pursuing pro-Iranian politics, also close to Russia and China, such as Kais al-Chazali, but they operate outside the hawza, which closes the path to religious advancement in Iraq for them and reduces them to the role of politicians. The Najaf hawza is, furthermore, critical of Iran, which results from rivalry and differing perceptions of the relationship between religion and politics, nevertheless calling it anti-Iranian would be an exaggeration.

It is worrying that Russia, exploiting the fact that its ambassador is a Muslim, tries to involve him in Shiite religious events (e.g., iftar at Ameri's or prayers conducted by Karbalai). There is no clear evidence of stronger ties of Sunni religious leaders, in particular leaders of the Sufi Qadiriyya order, to which Kadyrov also belongs, with Russia, although there is considerable potential in this area, and Russia is perceived in Iraq as a country supporting Muslims.

Among Russian assets in Iraq can definitely be included the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East Mar Awa III, who has visited Russia many times and has close relations with the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, condemned the West and Ukraine for alleged "persecution of Christians" (related to actions taken against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate), and in October 2024 was awarded the "Order of Friendship" by the Russian Consulate General in Erbil "for the patriarch's contribution to building cooperation between the Assyrian Church of the East and Russia and supporting intercultural and interreligious relations." Mar Awa III was born in the USA but is the great-grandson of an officer of the tsarist army.

6.4 Political leaders

The greatest direct influence on the political scene in Iraq is held by Iran and Türkiye, while other countries, in particular China, Russia, as well as Arab states (especially Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia), build their influence more indirectly. Russian influence is built through the use of the moods of certain circles to strengthen its position, promote its narrative about the war in Ukraine, and the negative image of the West, particularly the USA. In these activities, Russia also tries to create interpersonal ties by inviting Iraqi politicians to Russia. Great importance in building these relations is also held by the very active ambassador Elbrus Kutrashvili. China has fewer tools for ideological influence, so it focuses on building influence through economic means, particularly corruption. Nevertheless, at the same time, China is well regarded by most political groups in Iraq (the exception being the Tishreen circles, i.e., the anti-government protest movement from 2019, as well as former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who blocked deepening cooperation with China – however, these circles currently do not play a major role and it is doubtful that they will succeed in the 2025 elections).

1. **The highest political leadership of Iraq** is based on three persons holding the following positions (in order of their importance): the prime minister, the speaker of parliament, and the president. Currently, these are held by individuals who cannot be considered leaders respectively of the Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani pursues a policy of maintaining balance in Iraq's foreign relations. However, the fact is that Iran has strengthened its position in Iraq after the formation of his government. This results from the fact that Sudani's government relies on the support of pro-Iranian factions, which strengthens Iranian influence, and indirectly also Russian and Chinese, and Sudani would not be able to stop this even if he wanted to. Sudani's attempts to maintain balance and his good relations with the US ambassador to Iraq, Alina Romanowski, have led to moves within the pro-Iranian Shiite camp to remove him from office. These tendencies intensified after the outbreak of a wiretapping scandal, i.e., accusations appeared that the prime minister's closest circle was wiretapping leading politicians, including leaders of pro-Iranian factions, and some pro-Iranian politicians suggested that this was at the behest of the USA. During his term, Sudani visited both the USA (twice: April and September 2024) and Russia (October 2023), but he did not visit China (despite receiving an invitation) and did not go to the BRICS summit in Kazan despite speculation that Iraq would also submit a membership application. Furthermore, in February 2023, by Sudani's decision, Iraq voted for a resolution in the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine and calling for its withdrawal from Ukraine. President Abdul Latif Rashid, a Kurd from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, is also not susceptible to foreign influence from a particular state. Rashid spent many years in the United Kingdom, where he studied, and also worked in UN agencies on projects implemented in, among others, Saudi Arabia. However, he is closely connected to the Talabani family (Hero Ibrahim, widow of Jalal Talabani, is his sister-in-law), who currently maintain good relations with Iran.

However, the 76-year-old chairman of the Iraqi parliament, Mahmud al-Mashhadani, elected to this position in November 2024 after a one-year vacancy following the removal of Mohammad al-Halbousi from this office, is susceptible to Russian and Chinese influence, as well as (despite being a Sunni) Iranian influence. Mashhadani was born in the Shiite district of Baghdad (al-Kadhimiya). Until 1980 he was an officer (major) in Saddam's army, after which he was arrested on charges of extremist activity in connection with the founding of an association called al-Muwahid (although there is little information on this, it was probably a radically Islamist group). Although he was later imprisoned again by Saddam, after the US invasion accusations appeared against him of ties to the Baath party (in those circles Russia had and may still have influence). Nevertheless, he was recognized as a representative of the anti-Saddam opposition and served as chairman of the parliament from 2006 to 2008. However, he did not create any strong political group on this basis, and in 2004 he was arrested by the USA for leading extremist organizations. In 2009, information again appeared that he was leading a pro-Baath militia in the Fadel district in Baghdad. In September 2024, an article by Mashhadani was published on the website of al-Ahad television (owned by Kais al-Chazali, a key pro-Iranian politician), in which he suggested that Western influences lead to a civilizational disaster and are spread in Iraq through Freemasonry and Jewish Kabbalists. This shows high susceptibility to anti-Western Russian narratives based on the alleged degeneration of the West and the need to fight it. Also notable is the difference in statements issued after his election from meetings with the US ambassador Alina Romanowski on the one hand (according to the Mashhadani office statement, he emphasized the importance of resolving the security agreement issue, i.e., the withdrawal of US forces before the end of 2025, without words about the importance of cooperation, friendship, etc.) and the Russian ambassador Elbrus Kutrashev (press information included statements that Mashhadani emphasized the importance of Russia's role in supporting Iraq at the regional and international level, as well as references to the war in Ukraine based on the Russian perception). The statement after the meeting with the Chinese ambassador spoke of a "strategic partnership" between the two countries, and al-Mashhadani said that "Iraqi-Chinese relations are characterized by strength and stability, which encourages both sides to maintain and develop them." Also, the tone of the statement from the meeting with the Iranian ambassador indicated Mashhadani's positive attitude towards that country. The susceptibility to external influences is increased by the fact that Mashhadani has no own political base.

2. **Shiite Coordination Framework** – despite close relations of most Shiite politicians with Iran, they maintain a certain degree of independence. This particularly concerns former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the support base of Mohammad Shia al-Sudani, as well as politicians such as Ammar al-Hakim, Iyad Allawi, Haider al-Abadi, who also maintain relations with the USA, Turkiye, and Sunni Arab states. However, Russia and China have benefited from the general pro-Iranian course (which assumes maintaining a certain balance in relations with the West and the USA) and especially Russia tries to intensify its relations with these politicians through regular meetings and invitations to visit Russia. Notably, Kutrashev participated in prayers in Karbala with Ammar al-Hakim, conducted by the most influential eulogist Bassam al-Karbala'i, which went beyond ordinary relations. Meanwhile, Maliki's environment in its narrative about the war in

Ukraine places all blame on the USA, adopting the narrative of an "attack on Russia using Ukraine." Maliki himself visited Russia three times, twice as prime minister – in 2009 and 2012, and also in 2017. Sudani visited Moscow in October 2023 as well.

Among the politicians who have visited Russia are also, among others, the National Security Advisor who also heads the government oversight commission of Hashed al-Shaabi, Falih al-Fayyadh (several times, including in 2016, 2019, 2021, and 2022), who especially made efforts to purchase the S-400 system for Iraq. In October 2024, the chairman of the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council, Faiq Zaidan (a Shiite with strong ties to Iran and support from the muqawama), led a large delegation to Moscow.

The politicians associated with the muqawama and other pro-Iranian Shiite militias, including Kais al-Chazali and Hadi al-Ameri, who are the most important allies of Iran in Iraq, should be characterized differently. Kais al-Chazali, leader of Asaib Ahl al-Hak and simultaneously of the al-Sadiqoun faction in the Iraqi parliament, is recognized as a terrorist by the USA, which excludes any contacts, and at the same time he is hostile towards Turkiye, while his relations with Russia and China are becoming increasingly intensive. Kataib Hezbollah, the most active component of the muqawama, publicly distanced itself in 2015 from contacts then established by Abu Husein al-Hamidawi (currently Secretary General of KH) with the Russian embassy, emphasizing that it does not intend to carry out Russian interests. Hamidawi himself, after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, criticized this and although he repeated the narrative of Russia being provoked by the West, he added that Russia was also guilty of the bloodshed. Most other leaders of pro-Iranian militias, such as Asaib Ahl al-Hak or Kataib Said al-Shuhada, uncritically repeated the Russian narrative. The leader of the Huquq Movement (the political representation of Kataib Hezbollah) in the Iraqi parliament, Hussein Munis, sharply criticized Sudani for voting in February 2023 for the resolution condemning Russia. A similar statement was published on Twitter by Hasan Salem, the representative of Sadiqoun (Asaib Ahl al-Hak) in parliament. The development of relations between the muqawama and Russia gained momentum in 2022 thanks to Kutrashhev. In November 2022, Kutrashhev met with Chazali, and the leader of Harakat al-Nujaba Akram al-Kaabi paid a visit to Moscow (this organization currently has the strongest relations with Russia but Chazali has a stronger position in Iraq and therefore is more valuable from Moscow's perspective). During al-Kaabi's visit, he held talks with Russian officials, including Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov. He also met with Vitaly Naumkin, an Arabist, currently one of Putin's advisers in the Valdai Club and director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The third meeting took place with Albert Karaganov, a Tatar imam, mufti of Moscow, and chairman of the Spiritual Assembly of Muslims of Russia.

Among the Shiite figures subject to Russian influence can also be included the Chairman of the Media and Communication Commission, Ali Al-Muayyad, who in October 2024 spoke with Kutrashhev about "strengthening media cooperation between Iraq and Russia and counteracting misleading reports."

Also counted among the advocates of Chinese interests, and indirectly also Russian interests, is Adil Abd al-Mahdi, who as prime minister visited China accompanied by

a large political-economic delegation and attempted to sign an agreement favorable to that country "oil for reconstruction."

3. **Muqtada as-Sadr** – despite his decidedly hostile attitude towards the USA and Great Britain and at least a cool attitude towards other Western countries, Sadr is neither pro-Russian nor pro-Chinese. This also applies to his supporters due to their strict subordination and fanatical adoration of Sadr. Sadr has not met in recent years with the Russian ambassador, although it is a fact that Kutashev met with people from his entourage, which could not have happened without Sadr's consent (moreover, in 2005 there was a meeting between Sadr and then-Russian ambassador Vladimir Gamov – on Sadr's initiative). However, these were not intensive contacts. Furthermore, in February 2022 Sadr criticized the Russian attack on Ukraine and although at the same time he also blamed the USA, he compared the official reasons given by Russia to those given by the USA in 2003 related to the invasion of Iraq, i.e., he rejected them as false. Sadr's destabilizing activity in Iraq, his extreme anti-Americanism, pressure to force the USA to leave Iraq, as well as susceptibility to the narrative of the "demoralization of the West" (in 2022 Sadr organized an anti-LGBT campaign) favor Russian interests in Iraq but do not mean that he belongs to Russian assets. However, if Sadr considers Russia an ally in combating US influence and actions against Israel, then Russia's influence on him may increase. So far, Russia has not sought closer relations with Sadr (in April 2024 Sadr complained that Putin did not respond to his letter) due to his official withdrawal from politics and Russia's support for Sadr's Shiite rivals, but at the same time Russia tries not to close the door on him (positive statements by Kutashev about Sadr). Sadr is in conflict with pro-Iranian factions, which, however, does not mean that he has a negative attitude toward Iran, although here as well Sadr cannot be considered a tool of Iranian influence (but also not anti-Iranian). Sadr's relations with China are not very intense either.
4. **Rajan al-Kaldani** – the leader of the Christian militia Babylon is very strongly connected with Iran and pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, particularly Kataib Hezbollah, is on the US sanctions list, and is decidedly hostile to the USA and the West. This causes him to also be a potential instrument for promoting the interests of Russia and China. In May 2023, Kutashev paid a visit to Kaldani.
5. **Political leadership among Sunnis** underwent the greatest transformations after 2003. Until recently, the leaders of the Sunnis were primarily Mohammad al-Halbusi (associated with Saudi Arabia) and Khamis Khanjar (associated with Turkiye, Qatar, and to some extent – Iran). Halbusi met multiple times with the Russian ambassador and representatives of the Russian government: October 23, 2017 – meeting with the Russian ambassador, November 2018 and April 2019 – meetings with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, February 2023 – meeting with Lavrov during his visit to Baghdad, June 23, 2024 – meeting with the Russian ambassador. However, such meetings are not surprising considering that he served as the speaker of the parliament for 5 years. Halbusi was removed from this position in November 2023 but still maintains very strong influence among Sunnis. After the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Halbusi met with the Ukrainian chargé d'affaires, Oleksandr Borzhynkov, and expressed regret over the difficult humanitarian situation in Ukraine, however, according

to Kurdistan²⁴, he avoided unequivocal condemnation of Russia. Halbusi also became known as an advocate for closer cooperation with China. Despite an invitation to the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg in 2019, there is no confirmation that he attended or has ever visited Russia.

In the case of Khanjar, who is on the US sanctions list and is accused of having close relations with Saddam Hussein's regime before 2003, there is no information about meetings with Kutrashev. In November 2024, Khanjar was forced to step down as head of his party due to accusations regarding connections to the Baath Party regime; however, this does not necessarily mean the end of his career. Among Turkish assets can also be included Abdullah al-Nujaifi, the leader of the Arab Sunnis in Mosul and son of former governor Atheel al-Nujaifi, who remained in sharp conflict with pro-Iranian forces.

6. **Kurds** – both Russia and China limit themselves to investing in contacts with the ruling PDK (Barzanis) and PUK (Talabanis), as these groups (and the families leading them) effectively have full power over the so-called “Yellow Kurdistan” (Dohuk, Erbil) and “Green Kurdistan” (Sulaymaniyah, Halabja) respectively, controlling armed forces, security forces, economy, investments, etc. Kutrashev’s relations with the Barzani family and its entourage are very strong (frequency of meetings, emphasizing Kurdish-Russian ties, etc.); however, it is difficult to regard the leading politicians of the PDK as Russian FIMI assets (and likewise for China). The same applies to the Talabani family and the PUK. This is visible, for example, in the narrative regarding the war in Ukraine or the general image of the USA and the West, which in the media controlled by the Talabani and Barzani families is far from adopting the narrative promoted by Russia. The Barzanis also try to demonstrate their good relations with the West, exemplified by the participation of President Nechirvan Barzani in the reopening of the renovated Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (where he was one of the few non-Christian guests). Furthermore, Russia has potential influence over Islamist groups (based on the narrative of a degenerate West), but due to the small role of these groups from Russia’s (and China’s) interest perspective, this currently does not have major significance. Both families and the groups they lead primarily pursue their own interests, and as a result, they exhibit significant flexibility. It is a fact that the PDK has very close relations with Turkiye, but these arise solely from interests, and the Barzanis currently also maintain good relations with Iran (for pragmatic reasons), the USA (they want the longest possible presence of US forces as it reduces pressure from Hashed al-Shaabi), and until recently maintained secret relations with Israel. The Talabanis and the PUK maintain very good relations with Iran but only for pragmatic and economic reasons, while at the same time trying to have the best possible relations with the USA and other Western countries. The PUK is, however, in sharp conflict with Turkiye. Notably, Bafel Talabani visited Moscow in March 2024, where he met with Lavrov and Bogdanov.

6.5 Military leaders, military cooperation and non-state military formations

The structure of Iraqi security forces is very complex and includes formations that simultaneously function as militias (this is a hybrid nature that escapes a strict division into state and non-state institutions). The security forces are primarily made up of: armed forces subordinate to the Ministry of Defense; militarized police forces subordinate to the Ministry of Interior; Hashd al-Shaabi, including muqawama; counter-terrorism forces (CTS); Peshmerga.

- **Armed forces** – Since October 2022, the Minister of National Defense has been Thabet al-Abbasi, a Sunni from Nineveh, representing the Hasm party, which is supported by Turkiye in the Nineveh provincial council; his activities as minister indicate that he has good relations with Turkiye, and this explains the talks between delegations of both countries in August 2024, which resulted in the recognition of the PKK as an “illegal organization in Iraq.” However, no far-reaching conclusions should be drawn from this about Turkish influence on the Iraqi army. It is largely apolitical, and the senior command is composed of officers who served in Saddam’s army and have cooperated with the USA for years. The Chief of Staff is Gen. Abdul Amir Raszid Yarallah, who has extensive experience in cooperation with the USA and NATO, and there are no signs of Russian, Chinese, or Iranian influence. Yarallah is a Shia who joined the army under Saddam. In April 2022, a conference on the Russian-Ukrainian war was held at the Center for Studies and Research at the Defence University for Higher Military Studies, attended by him and numerous Iraqi officers, as well as American general Michael Lollesgaard.
- **Militarized police** – the current Minister of the Interior is Gen. Abdul Amir al-Szamarai, a Shia born in Diwaniyah, who previously served in the armed forces – the Iraqi Ministry of Interior has been controlled for years by people from the Badr Organization led by Hadi al-Ameri, which potentially opens it to Iranian influence, and indirectly also to Russian and Chinese influences. However, there are no grounds to consider al-Szamarai himself as a tool of influence of Russia, Iran, or China. He has indeed met with Kutrashv but also with the U.S. ambassador Alina Romanowski.

- **CTS** – counter-terrorism forces are the most apolitical and are trained by the USA and other NATO countries. Although Gen. Abdel Wahad al-Saadi, who was always viewed negatively by pro-Iranian forces in Iraq, was dismissed after Sudani took office as Prime Minister, his deputy Gen. Karim Abboud Muhammad was promoted in his place.
- **Hashd al-Shaabi** – since its inception, Hashd al-Shaabi, and especially its component known as muqawama, has been strongly linked with Iran. Muqawama consists of: Kataib Hezbollah (Ahmad Abu Hussein Al Hamidawi), Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Akram al-Kaabi), Kataib Said al-Shuhada (Abu Ala al-Walai), and Ashab al-Kahf. Loosely connected to this structure is Asaib Ahl al-Haq of Qais al-Khazali, which results from his political position within the government's backing. The pro-Iranian character also applies to the Badr Organization, the largest component of Hashd al-Shaabi, led by Hadi al-Ameri. However, Badr and AAH are too strongly linked with the government and thus have significant influence within state structures, which causes them to be far more cautious regarding direct confrontations with the USA. A proponent of Hashd al-Shaabi's cooperation with Russia has been, since 2016, Fali al-Fayyadh, National Security Advisor, who simultaneously supervises Hashd al-Shaabi on behalf of the government. However, Russia started gaining greater influence within these formations since 2022. Russia, in particular, gained influence in Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, whose leader Akram al-Kaabi visited Russia in 2022. Kutrashv is also trying to establish strong cooperation with Qais al-Khazali, but although his al-Ahad TV presents a positive narrative about Russia in the context of the Ukraine war, it is difficult to unequivocally consider him as a Russian instrument of influence. Khazali certainly sympathizes with Russia but, due to his central position in Sudani's government backing and political ambitions, he is also open to contacts with the West (but not the USA) – for instance, in February 2023, he met with the Australian ambassador (although Western embassies generally do not maintain contact with him, it takes place with his people positioned in state offices). Kutrashv also meets with other muqawama leaders, e.g., Abu Ala al-Walai. China also has very strong influence within Hashd al-Shaabi. Muqawama's attacks on the US position in Iraq serve Chinese interests by pushing the US out of Iraq. That this is a conscious convergence of interests is evidenced by an agreement concluded in March 2024 between the company Al Muhandis, created by Sudani's government as the economic arm of Al-Hashd, and the Chinese CMEC.
- **Peshmerga** – Kurdish Peshmerga units are formally part of the Iraqi land forces but in practice most Peshmerga are divided into the KDP and PUK factions and loyal to the Barzani and Talabani families. The KDP Peshmerga and the security forces subordinate to the KDP have some Turkish influence, but it should not be overestimated.

6.6 Traditional and non-traditional media, opinion leaders

The biggest transmitters of the Russian narrative are social media channels linked to muqawama such as Sabereen News (which, among other things, broadcast pro-Russian reports from occupied Crimea and also published a song supporting the Wagner Group, using terminology and symbolism close to Iraqi Shias) and Tura News, as well as TV stations connected to muqawama, particularly TV Al Ahad, Al Etejah, and Al Qadeer. In Kurdish media, especially key TV stations concerned with their reputation, the narrative regarding the war in Ukraine is mostly neutral (there is no repetition of Russian propaganda in this area); however, Chinese influence is visible (particularly regarding Kurdistan24 and Rudaw). Significant social media accounts spreading the pro-Russian narrative include: Sufian Sammarai – <https://x.com/SufianSamarrai> and Sabah al-Khozai – <https://x.com/sabahalkhozai>. Kutrashev is present (follows but does not post) on the Whatsapp channel of the Rafidain Center for Dialogue (RCD). In 2022, he appeared at the RCD Forum (an international event organized with great scale) on a panel dedicated to Ukraine, where he made sure the Ukrainian flag was present (suggesting that Ukrainian representatives were also at the Forum, which was not true) in order to refer to it with a narrative about “Ukrainian brothers” dying because the West attacked Russia through the illegal “Zelensky regime.”

6.7 Academic and scientific cooperation

- In this area, the most extensive activity is carried out by China, which in Kurdistan, through the Huawei Academy of Information and Communication Technology, offers courses and certificates at the Lebanese-French University (LFU), Garmany University, Dohuk University, Sulaymaniyah Polytechnic, and Salaheddin University.
- Russia, on the other hand, offers scholarships to Iraqis, including Kurds – this is the basic form of cooperation carried out on a large scale and heavily publicized. Examples of cooperation:
- In August 2012, the University of Baghdad announced cooperation with Russian universities, especially in the sciences related to the extraction of oil, gas, and other raw materials;
- In May 2023, the Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University, the Iraqi University of Mashreq, and the Iraqi Society of Soil Mechanics and Foundation Design organized a scientific conference in Baghdad “for the good of the international community.” On the Iraqi side, participants included Dr. Mohanad Muayad Sabri, Prof. Kifaya Alsafar, and Prof. Mahadi Karkoush.
- In November 2023, Russian and Iraqi delegations signed a memorandum of cooperation with representatives of Iran regarding “the desire to create a new culture, science, and Islamic civilization serving all people and societies.”

- In April 2024 - Russian Consul General in Kurdistan, Maxim Robin, announced that Russia is preparing 300 scholarships for Iraqi students, including 70 specifically for residents of Kurdistan.
- In May 2024, Ambassador Kutrashev visited the University of Baghdad, at the invitation of the university, to celebrate the Russian language department festival.
- In June 2024 - Belgorod State University opened a branch of the "Preparatory Faculty" at Al-Mamoun University in Baghdad. An agreement was also reached on opening a branch of the BelSU preparatory faculty based at the Center for Modern Languages, directed by Dr. Faris Youssef Hassan Awad. The preparation of this agreement played a significant role for the "BelSU ambassador to the Middle East and North Africa, BelSU Medical Institute graduate student Ahmed Mansour."
- In June 2023, a delegation from the Russian North Caucasus National University met in Erbil with Dr. Aram Mohammed Qadir – Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research of Kurdistan, Dr. Kamaran Younis Mohammadami, President of Salahaddin University-Erbil, Dr. Kawa Abdulkarim Sherwan, President of Erbil Polytechnic University, Dr. Abdul Samad Salahuddin, President of Tishk International University, and Dr. Sherwan Sharif Qurtas, President of Soran University. The discussions focused on new forms of cooperation, including Russian language studies, humanities, as well as engineering and research on oil and gas extraction.
- In September 2024, during the 68th IAEA conference, Iraqis signed a memorandum of cooperation with Rosatom on the development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. The representative of Iraq was Dr. Naeem Al-Aboudi, head of the Iraqi Atomic Energy Commission and Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, who thanked the Russians for scholarships for Iraqi students, intended to help them develop technical skills.
- In September 2024, the Crimean Federal University announced closer cooperation with universities from Iraq, Iran, China, India, and Sudan;
- In September 2024, Ambassador Kutrashev confirmed that Rossotrudnichestvo will provide students from Kurdistan with 70 fully funded scholarships in Russia for the 2025-2026 academic year.
- In November 2024, the Iraqi Minister of Higher Education announced that the number of scholarships in Russia will amount to 260;
- In December 2024, an Iraqi delegation visited the Russian National Research Nuclear University MEPhI. Cooperation on nuclear matters was discussed. Hope was expressed that MEPhI will train Iraqi personnel.
- Furthermore, the University of Zakho, the University of Tikrit, and the University of Fallujah belong to the Federation of Russian and Arab Universities. At the IV Forum of Rectors of this Federation, held at Lomonosov University in Moscow in October 2024, Iraq was represented by Thmer Hassan Najafi from Al-Karkh University of Science in Baghdad.

Chapter 7: Selected Techniques and Tactics of Manipulation, Linguistic Mechanisms of Persuasion, Psychological Actions and Effects — Identification and Analysis

Russian influence operations in Iraq are based on an extensive catalog of psychological action techniques and tactics. The foundation is consistent modeling of information spaces to achieve and manage desired informational effects. Observation of the Iraqi information environment reveals a complex model of Russian influence using classical psychological action techniques and tactics implemented across multiple domains. Russia's operations in Iraq are part of a broader Moscow strategy in the Middle East and Levant region, aimed at strengthening its own strategic position, weakening the role of the West, and supporting political solutions favoring the long-term interests of the Kremlin. Techniques and tactics employed by Russia are multilayered, interconnected, and mutually complementary, spanning informational, media, political-diplomatic, economic, energy, military, and social spheres.

7.1 Information and Propaganda Influence

Pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives

Russia, using its “media” channels widely available in Arabic (such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic) as well as cooperating portals and news agencies, consistently builds an image of itself as an alternative, stabilizing player, who, unlike the West, does not seek hegemony but supports the sovereignty and independence of countries in the region. In this way, Russian influence operations precisely fit into the psychological sensitivities of Iraqis, especially by juxtaposing the image of the West as destructive and Russia as a guarantor of stability.

- **Multi-vector messages:** Russia conducts multi-vector informational activities designed for precise psychological effects. A good example is narratives targeted at individual Western countries, uniformly portraying them negatively as states threatening the peace and security of the region. In this way, the psychological effects of these actions correspond with the sensitivities of the multi-generational trauma of Iraqi society, which, having been affected by numerous conflicts, responds positively to the images of peace and stability that Russia promotes.

Example: psychologically, the role of Russia in defeating the so-called Islamic State in Syria is emphasized and it is underlined that without its help the entire region would be more unstable. At the same time, the actions of the West are disparaged, portraying them as destabilizing and serving exclusively American interests.

- **Distribution of disinformation:** Russia and China have a developed apparatus of influence over discourse conducted through social media platforms. Through anonymous or fake accounts on social media, as well as via Kremlin-linked news portals and blog networks, Russians, together with the Chinese, spread persuasions that fulfill the strategic goals of both states in the region.

Tactics:

- Hiring (corrupting) local journalists, activists, or opinion leaders.
- Deliberately sowing confusion around public discussions, e.g., about the presence of American troops, government negotiations with the West, issues of oil resource division, or ethnic and religious problems.
- Building alternative, conspiratorial explanations of events to reduce trust in official statements from the Iraqi government or information provided by Western news agencies, in order to "legitimize" their own messaging and popularize Russian and Chinese sources.
- Secondary mass distribution of propaganda and manipulative content that relates to previously introduced disinformation to legitimize it and create an impression of credibility. The process of secondary manipulation is carried out using controlled local journalists, news portals, radio stations, and involves high activity of personnel, including political figures, in nationwide media.

Diplomacy, political contacts, and elite lobbying

- **Personal relationships with key decision-makers:**

Russia strives to maintain direct contact with influential individuals at various levels of influence. The tactic includes corrupting opinion leaders of varying potential — from the local to the strategic level — to develop favorable relationships through which activities in the areas of security, economy, and military cooperation can be carried out. Russian diplomatic personnel, military attachés, and special envoys meet with local leaders, activists, members of political parties, militia leaders, key figures in the Iraqi parliament, as well as persons from military and intelligence circles. Effect: the creation of informal networks of influence and dependency in which Russian interests are taken into account in the decision-making process of the Iraqi government.

- **Exploitation of ethnic-religious tensions:**

The Kremlin supports and inspires actions of groups that favor limiting US influence by playing on internal divisions in Iraq (e.g., between Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmen). Example: Maintaining and financing contacts with Shiite militias or politicians who are skeptical of the West. These activities do not necessarily involve direct support — often, signaling a willingness to cooperate or promoting narratives favorable to pro-Russian environments is sufficient.

7.2 Economic influence, especially in the energy sector: Tactics of behind-the-scenes financing of active measures, corruption, infiltration

Oil and gas investments

Russian companies such as Lukoil, Gazprom Neft, and Rosneft have been investing for years in Iraqi oil and gas fields. A key project is the West Qurna-2 oil field, managed by Lukoil, one of the largest in the world. Gazprom Neft is developing the Badra field, while Rosneft is strengthening cooperation with the Kurdistan Regional Government, investing in pipeline construction to Türkiye. However, behind the investments lies more than just economic profit. Russia uses its presence in Iraq as a tool to increase geopolitical influence in the Middle East. The Russian operational model in Iraq often relies on opaque agreements resulting from negotiations outside standard procedures. Experts warn that corruption has become an integral part of these activities. An example is Rosneft's policy in the Kurdistan Region — cooperation with the regional authorities weakens the position of the central government in Baghdad, creating tensions between Iraqi regions. In exchange for investments, Russia gains strategic assets, such as control over oil transit to Türkiye. This is not only an economic strengthening but also an instrument of political pressure and corruption, especially in the context of the American presence in the region. Moscow builds spheres of influence in Iraq that are used in other areas to weaken Western alliances and promote Russian geopolitical interests.

China, the largest importer of Iraqi oil, implements in this country its strategy of “oil for investments.” Companies such as China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Sinopec, and CNOOC develop oil and gas fields in Basra and Al-Ahdab. The Chinese also finance the construction of roads, ports, and power plants as part of the global Belt and Road Initiative. At first glance, the Chinese presence in Iraq appears beneficial. Beijing supports the reconstruction of the country's infrastructure and modernizes the energy sector. However, behind these activities lie deeper goals. Iraq becomes another piece in the global puzzle of Chinese influence. Long-term oil supply contracts bind Baghdad to Beijing, limiting the space for cooperation with other partners. The Chinese strategy also relies on opacity and corruption. Agreements are often negotiated without transparent tender procedures, enabling funds to flow to local political elites in exchange for favorable conditions for Chinese companies. This policy cements Chinese influence within the Iraqi administration and economy while simultaneously undermining efforts to build transparent institutions in the country.

7.3 Military and Security Forms of Engagement

Deliveries of armaments and training: Tactics of penetrating the Iraqi security sector for the purpose of control and influence

Russia and China engage not only in the energy sector but also in the military and security spheres to secure their interests, influence Iraqi policy, and increase their presence in the Middle East. These activities are part of a broader strategy for building influence, conducting psychological operations, and are linked to corruption, infiltration of state structures, and exerting political pressure. Russia provides Iraq's security forces with military equipment (helicopters, defense systems, small arms, ammunition) as well as support in the form of training, military advisory, and intelligence cooperation. These military relationships strengthen Russia's importance as an indispensable partner in the fight against terrorism and can gradually reduce Iraq's dependence on American equipment and technology. Russian advisors and military instructors offer extensive training programs for Iraqi soldiers, covering equipment operation, strategic planning, and conducting combat operations. Through this, Moscow gains influence within Iraq's military and political structures. Russian military involvement in Iraq is not just business—it carries a broader psychological dimension. Shaping the attitudes of Iraq's security sector is intended to safeguard Russian interests and limit or block Western influence.

Cooperation with Iran: through the coordination of activities in Iraq, Russia is tightening its alliance with Tehran, creating an alternative axis of influence in the Middle East and thereby increasing the potential for impact and psychological pressure on Iraq. The effect: Deepening military relations and creating channels of influence on institutions responsible for state security, which also enables access to information about the internal situation in Iraq.

Through indirect contacts, for instance via Iran, Russia infiltrates militias and groups that oppose the presence of the USA in the region. In this way, it increases the potential for informational and psychological operations by transferring activities to local structures in the informational and technical spheres. Local activities are relatively subtle. They include offers of support in the form of training, advisory services, or steering the narrative about a common fight against "foreign interference." Russia consistently maintains rhetoric as a stabilizer and guarantor of peace in the region, from which it draws the effectiveness of this kind of action in the informational-psychological domain.

Russia and China exploit the lack of transparency in Iraqi institutions to strengthen their political and economic influence. The main consequences of their actions are high-level corruption. Contracts for arms and technology supplies are often negotiated outside official tender procedures, which favors the flow of funds into the pockets of local political elites.

Infiltration of state structures: Russian and Chinese advisors and contractors are becoming an integral part of the Iraqi armed forces and institutions, which increases their ability to influence decisions and to disperse actors through whom they pursue their own interests. Long-term contracts and dependence on technology are strategies through which Iraq is to become dependent on Russia and China, significantly enhancing the effectiveness of controlling and steering Iraq's decision-making processes.

7.4 Socio-Cultural Influence Tactics

Influence on culture and education

Russia and China, in addition to economic, military, and infrastructural activities, are increasingly focusing on building their influence in Iraq through socio-cultural actions. These subtle but strategic steps include promoting language and culture, developing academic relations, supporting educational projects, and using media and technology to shape public opinion with special propaganda techniques. Both Moscow and Beijing seek to create an image of themselves as key partners of Iraq, while simultaneously strengthening their positions within Iraqi society and politics. Russia organizes scholarship programs for Iraqi students, scientific conferences, cultural exhibitions, and initiates cooperation between universities and think tanks. In this way, it creates an image of a country open to cultural and intellectual exchange, conducive to building pro-Russian intellectual elites. China places great emphasis on promoting the Chinese language and developing academic relations in Iraq. China has opened educational centers that offer Chinese language courses and organize events promoting Chinese culture, such as tea festivals, calligraphy demonstrations, and traditional music. Iraqis are invited to study in China under the "Belt and Road" scholarship program. Fields supported include engineering, medicine, and management, which are crucial for China's economic engagement in the region.

Tactics of influence through "technological diplomacy"

Technologies constitute one of the significant tools of China in building socio-cultural influence in Iraq. Chinese companies, such as Huawei and ZTE, participate in the modernization of Iraqi telecommunication infrastructure. These projects not only build Iraq's technological dependence on China but also allow Beijing to collect data and influence the flow of information. Chinese applications, such as TikTok, are gaining increasing popularity in Iraq, which gives Beijing subtle influence over the younger generation of Iraqis.

Russian activities in Iraq are not isolated but form part of a larger puzzle involving Syria, Iran, Türkiye, and also the Gulf states. Through skillful juggling of relations with these actors, Russia can strengthen its negotiating position and consequently more easily influence Baghdad's decisions.

Every action by Russia and China in Iraq that worsens Baghdad's relations with the West strengthens the strategic position of Beijing and the Kremlin. In practice, this means supporting those actors and narratives that favor the withdrawal or reduction of Western forces' engagement, as well as portraying the USA as an aggressor who has never led to real

stabilization. Russia and China effectively use socio-cultural tactics to build their influence in Iraq. Moscow focuses on promoting language, culture, and religious relations, while Beijing uses education, technologies, and development projects. Both strategies are part of broader geopolitical actions aimed at strengthening these countries' positions in the region and limiting Western influence. In the face of this challenge, Iraq must find a way to maintain a balance between the benefits of cooperation with Russia and China and the protection of its sovereignty and cultural identity. Russia does not operate in Iraq in a clear-cut or one-off manner. Rather, it gradually and patiently builds its position, combining tools of "hard" and "soft" power to create a permanent place for itself in the internal and external politics of this country. Its strategy assumes flexible responses to changing conditions and the search for niches where influence can be expanded — whether through media, political contacts, economic cooperation, or through less overt forms of influence on local society and security structures.

Techniques and tactics of influence and psychological operations are closely correlated with the spectrum of persuasion tools used in Iraq and maintain (faulty) cause-and-effect relationships with the technique of psychological influence through Russia's multi-sectoral and multidomain influence in Iraq.

7.5 Propaganda techniques in the Iraqi information space

Monitoring of the Iraqi information environment in the period from September to December 2024 shows a strict and planned correlation of persuasion carried out by traditional psychological operations tactics through influence operations with the persuasion present in informational activities. We have identified a broad spectrum of narratives and propaganda messages appearing in the Iraqi infosphere, directed against the West, democratic values, and sometimes also against Poland. The informational-psychological actions are based on many mechanisms of linguistic persuasion.

Demonization of the "other" and creation of an external enemy: Persuasions emphasize the alleged aggressiveness, imperialism, colonialism, and destabilizing role of the West, particularly the United States. This leads the recipient to perceive the West in terms of a hostile, morally fallen, and dangerous aggressor. Portraying the USA/West as the perpetrators of all evil, initiators of wars, and provocateurs of conflicts, which allows focusing the audience's resentment and fear on a single "blame" center. This type of persuasion closely correlates with a tactic adapted to the psychological sensitivities of Iraqis, especially their multi-generational war trauma and PTSD.

Conspiracy theories and constructing false cause-and-effect relationships: persuasions systematically include false threads such as NATO attacking Russia using Ukraine, the USA controlling ISIS, the West provoking Russia into nuclear war, etc. Creating conspiratorial constructs strengthens the perception of the world as a stage of secret intrigues, in which the West is the main manipulator and enemy. Conspiracy theories and the persuasion promoted by Russia in Iraq appeal to emotions and the need to understand a complicated reality in a simple,

though false, way. They build a sense of threat and the impression of hidden truth, which the propaganda “reveals,” while simultaneously exposing the image of Russia as a selfless guarantor of security and stability.

Reversal of the roles of victim and perpetrator (projection): emphasizing that it is the West that is the aggressor and the actual perpetrator of wars, while Russia or other states hostile to the West only “react” to provocations. In this way, official, commonly accepted interpretations of events are dismantled. Projection involves attributing one’s own traits or actions to the opponent, which allows the perpetrator to build a narrative of their moral superiority.

Appeal to authorities and false sources of credibility: frequent quoting of the Russian ambassador, referencing Russian and Chinese media, creating messages to appear supported by evidence (e.g., alleged documents about executions of refugees, or statements by “independent” experts). Using sources that are perceived by the audience as credible to legitimize disinformation and manipulations.

Persuasion based on emotions, moral, and religious issues: persuasion based on emotions, moral, and religious issues in the Iraqi infosphere constitutes a significant pillar of anti-Western and anti-democratic propaganda. It arouses strong negative emotions, consolidates groups against designated enemies, and undermines the attractiveness of democratic values. The use of religious themes (e.g., Western Islamophobia, desecration of the Quran) or moral themes (the alleged spread of LGBT, sexual demoralization) serves to unite audiences against the “corrupt” West. Appealing to values regarded as sacred or inviolable evokes outrage and the need to defend against an external threat.

In the area of Iraq, similarly as in other parts of the Middle East, propaganda directed against the West is based not only on political or geopolitical arguments but also on emotions, moral values, and religious themes. The goal of such a strategy is:

- **Emotional and moral mobilization:** arousing anger, outrage, a sense of injustice and threat, which encourages society to stronger identification with an anti-Western stance.
- **Strengthening own identity and group cohesion:** presenting the West as a “foreign” and morally degenerate entity allows uniting the audience around values recognized as traditional, moral, and religious.
- **Discrediting democratic values:** attacking Western political systems, portraying democracy as falsehood and a tool of colonialism, aims to undermine the attractiveness of the liberal model and deter the audience from emulating it.

Psychological operation tactics include a wide range of simple but effective tools of manipulation.

Selective presentation of facts and contexts, omission of denials: propaganda highlights sensational and negative information, omitting their subsequent corrections. As a result, a negative image of the West becomes entrenched in the audience’s consciousness, even if denials appear. The primacy effect – the audience remembers the most drastic and emotional messages, while corrections often do not reach with equal force.

Mixing facts with fiction and sensational content: utilizing sensational headlines, unusual events (e.g., “children in Poland drinking vodka”), to shock the audience and sustain the impression of chaos, degeneration, and threat. Shocking reports divert attention from the lack of sources and justifications, evoke strong emotions, and hinder rational analysis.

Operating with the contrast "us–them" and building opposing images: presenting Russia or Iran as positive forces, protecting values and stability, in contrast to the destructive and immoral West. Strengthening the identity of one’s own group while simultaneously arousing hostility toward the foreign group, which facilitates creating unambiguous attitudes in society.

Mechanisms of linguistic persuasion in the Iraqi infosphere are primarily based on evoking strong emotions (fear, anger, moral outrage), presenting simplified and biased visions of the world (demonization of the opponent, conspiracy theories), using vivid and value-laden language, exploiting authorities that appear credible (ambassadors, official media), including sensational, manipulated, and often unverified content in the message. In this way, propaganda influences the perception of recipients, shaping a negative image of the West and democratic values.

7.6 Emotional Mechanisms of Persuasion

Russian propaganda in the Iraqi infosphere skillfully utilizes emotional mechanisms of persuasion. Fear of war and instability, anger and moral outrage at Western actions, contempt and hostility towards the "degenerate" West, compassion for the victims of its policies, and hope for a better world order under Russian leadership form a complex, multidimensional message. Such a strategy causes recipients not only to reject Western values and democratic ideals but also to seek an alternative in the Russian vision of the world, which in this narrative appears as morally superior, more just, and consistent with Iraq’s traditional values.

Monitoring of Iraq’s information environment revealed how Russian propaganda in the Iraqi infosphere uses a wide range of emotions to influence audiences and shape their negative perception of the West and democratic values. Key emotions in these messages include fear, anger, moral outrage, a sense of humiliation, contempt, and compassion, as well as—though to a lesser extent—hope and a sense of relief associated with the alternative offered by Russia and its allies.

Russian propaganda does not limit itself to a single feeling. It combines fear (of war, terror), anger (at the injustices and hypocrisy of the West), compassion (for victims of Western practices), contempt (for the "corrupt" Europe and USA), and hope (in the form of a strong and just Russia). This mixture is more powerful than using a single emotion because it reaches different aspects of the recipient’s psyche. As a result, it creates a complex and hard-to-disarm network of prejudices, resentments, and positive associations with Russia.

Fear and a sense of threat: Russian propaganda portrays the West (particularly the USA and NATO) as a force provoking conflicts of global scale. Narratives include warnings of another great war, potentially even nuclear, inspired by Western imperial ambitions. "Media" and statements by the Russian ambassador in Iraq often emphasize that the West provoked the war

in Ukraine and seeks to weaken Russia, which consequently may threaten the security of the entire world, including Iraq. Such messages evoke fear and a sense of threat, creating an image of a world in which the West is a dangerous, unpredictable aggressor. Fear mobilizes the audience to seek an alternative, stabilizing partner, which in these messages appears as Russia.

Anger and moral outrage: propaganda highlights the alleged hypocrisy of the West, which – in the Kremlin's narrative – uses democracy as a smokescreen to commit crimes, kill innocents, support terrorism, and destabilize other states.

Particularly strong moral outrage is aroused by portraying the West as a promoter of social demoralization, e.g., supporting the "licentiousness of women" or destroying traditional values. Iraqis are suggested to believe that the West deliberately breaks the social and religious fabric of Middle Eastern states. Anger and moral outrage encourage the audience to reject Western values and seek ideological support in actors opposed to the West (Russia, Iran, China), whom propaganda presents as morally pure and defenders of the traditional order.

Contempt and hostility: in propaganda messages, the West is often portrayed as "fallen," "degenerate," and "deceptive." The introduction of categories such as racism and Islamophobia is intended to evoke deep hostility in the Iraqi audience. Pro-Iranian or Sunni media, susceptible to anti-American sentiment, utilize Russian narratives to depict the West as morally inferior and worthy of contempt. Contempt toward the West deepens cultural and ideological distance, which hinders a rational view of messages coming from the USA or Europe. It builds long-lasting prejudices and resistance to cooperation with the West.

Compassion and solidarity with victims: Russian propaganda cites information about alleged executions of Iraqi migrants at the Polish-Belarusian border or the support by the USA for terrorist groups (ISIS, Al Qaeda). This arouses compassion for the victims and serves to emotionally direct attention to the "cruelty" of the West. Combined with narratives about genocides and colonial practices of the USA and its allies, compassion for the affected communities turns into a moral imperative to condemn and reject the West. **Compassion is joined with anger, creating a strong emotional conviction that the West is unjust and inhuman. This facilitates acceptance of the Russian perspective, according to which Russia acts as the defender of the oppressed.**

A sense of humiliation and desire for revenge: propaganda emphasizes historical wrongs committed by the West in the region (military interventions, colonialism, resource plundering, the humiliation of Iraq and other countries). Such messages fuel a sense of humiliation and injustice experienced in the past. **The feeling of humiliation turns into anger and a drive for revenge or at least to reject Western influence.** As a result, Russia, presenting itself as an "equal" player, can be perceived as a force restoring balance and pride to the aggrieved regions.

Hope, relief, and trust in the alternative (Russia and its allies): Russia tries to build its image as a state providing stability and respect for religion and tradition. Presenting Russia, China, or Iran as a counterbalance to the aggressive, declining West awakens hope for better, more just international relations. **Among the negative emotions, an element of relief**

appears: here is an alternative to Western domination. This feeling of hope and trust in a new order allows Russia to gain sympathy and favor from society.

Dynamic combination of emotions in propaganda narratives: Russian propaganda in the Iraqi infosphere skillfully utilizes emotional mechanisms of persuasion. Fear of war and instability, anger and moral outrage at Western actions, contempt and hostility toward the “degenerate” West, compassion for the victims of its policies, and hope for a better world order under Russian leadership form a complex, multidimensional message. Such a strategy causes recipients not only to reject Western values and democratic ideals but also to seek an alternative in the Russian vision of the world, which in this narrative appears as morally superior, more just, and consistent with Iraq’s traditional values.

In-depth analysis of emotions

Below is an in-depth analysis of the emotions that Russia tries to evoke among the Iraqi public opinion to present itself in a positive light. These are closely linked to the image of Moscow as a counterbalance to the West and as a credible, close, and understanding partner.

Russia, seeking to present itself positively in the Iraqi infosphere, appeals to a range of positive and constructive emotions: hope (for an alternative to the West), trust (due to support in difficult times), admiration and respect (for the strength and achievements of Moscow), empathy (demonstrating understanding of local problems), a sense of security (in an unstable world), and gratitude (for concrete assistance). Altogether, these emotions are meant to create the image of Russia as a close partner who not only does not threaten Iraqi interests but even supports them, providing stability, respect, and hope for a successful future.

Hope and a sense of alternative: Russia tries to present itself as an alternative to Western domination – mainly the USA – and their “unipolar” policy. Narratives emphasize the multipolar character of the world order, in which Moscow plays the role of a balancing power. By implying that the West is in retreat and losing significance, Russia creates the impression that there is a new, promising international deal. Iraqis may feel hope that they are not doomed to dependence on Western influences, and that there is another alleged path of development – with Russia’s participation – free from imperial pressures and resource exploitation.

Trust and credibility: Russia highlights its role in supporting Iraq in the fight against ISIS, recalling arms deliveries and military assistance that arrived at a time when – according to Russian disinformation – the USA failed or even blackmailed Iraq. Moscow presents itself here as a reliable ally who does not abandon partners and does not act cynically. Among recipients, the conviction forms that Russia is a trustworthy partner; the feeling of trust enhances readiness for cooperation and accepting the Russian perspective.

Admiration and respect: by showcasing its own military, scientific, technological, or energy power, Russia strives to build the image of a strong, independent, and innovative state. Showing successes on the battlefield (e.g., against ISIS in Syria) and suggesting a significant contribution to the development of world science or technology, Moscow aims to evoke admiration for its international position. Iraqi recipients exposed to this type of persuasion may begin to perceive Russia as a multidimensional power whose successes provoke respect.

This emotion may translate into greater susceptibility to Russian economic, political, or cultural initiatives.

Empathy and understanding: Russian persuasions seek to show that Moscow understands Iraqi problems – the trauma after the American intervention in 2003, difficulties with state reconstruction, threats from terrorism, or economic crises. Russia emphasizes the shared experience in fighting extremism, also suggesting that it respects the religion, culture, and customs of the countries in the region. Evoking empathy and the feeling that Russia truly understands the local context builds warm emotions and inclines people to see it as a “friendly country” rather than a distant, calculating actor.

A sense of stability and security: in opposition to the alleged chaos and aggressive Western interventions, Russia presents itself as a stabilizing force. Narratives indicate that Moscow desires peace and predictability, respects the sovereignty of states, and stands guard over an order in which there is no place for terror and unjust interference. Iraqis, experiencing the effects of wars and external interventions, may feel relief and a sense of security. Feeling that Russia stands on the side of stabilization and order, the audience will be more inclined to accept the Russian presence and cooperation proposals.

Gratitude and loyalty: by emphasizing its help and support in persuasions, and distancing itself from the policy of exploiting Iraq (which is attributed to America), Russia aims for Iraqis to feel gratitude for Russian actions. These may include arms deliveries in difficult moments, offering favorable energy agreements, or diplomatic support in regional conflicts. Gratitude for assistance and real benefits may translate into increased loyalty toward Moscow. The audience becomes more open to the Russian narrative and simultaneously less critical of Kremlin policy.

Russian propaganda in the Iraqi infosphere is based on a complex interplay of persuasion and emotions. On one hand, it reinforces negative feelings toward the West – fear, anger, moral outrage, and contempt – to portray it as a destabilizing, morally fallen force responsible for armed conflicts and abuses against the population. On the other hand, Russia seeks to present itself in a positive light, evoking emotions such as hope, trust, admiration, empathy, as well as a sense of security and gratitude. It creates the image of a reliable ally, understanding Iraq's problems and ready to support in difficult moments. As a result, Russian propaganda in the Iraqi media space aims not only to discredit the West but primarily to strengthen the positive image of Russia as a moral, credible, and stabilizing alternative.

CHAPTER 8. Propaganda activities aimed at the perception of the West and democratic values in Iraq

Propaganda aimed at the West is diverse depending on the source of the narrative and the target of the propaganda activities (e.g., the West as a whole; individual states; USA vs. Europe, etc.), as well as the context (the war in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine, migration, etc.). Kurdish media essentially do not consciously participate in propaganda activities directly aimed at the perception of the West, although this does not apply to such actions in the Kurdish infosphere as publishing comments on social media. However, Kurdish media may also influence the negative perception of the West by publishing “sensational” information replicated within cognitive influence, particularly by portraying the West as demoralized, declining, etc. A significant factor in this context is the immaturity of these media, which makes them susceptible to manipulation through uncritical adoption of news from Russian or Chinese sources. Moreover, indirectly, the positive narrative toward Russia or China may also contribute to the negative perception of the West, as it later legitimizes the propaganda activities of these states, including those undertaken by their diplomats (especially the Russian ambassador Elbrus Kutashev). The problem with Sunni media is similar to the problem with Kurdish media but they often show greater prejudices, especially toward the USA in connection with the 2003 intervention (some of these media are backed by funds from persons associated with the overthrown Saddam Hussein regime). This is also linked to a favorable attitude toward Russia and susceptibility to anti-democratic narratives and the demonization of “color revolutions.” In turn, pro-Iranian Shia media strongly demonize the West and are highly susceptible to the Russian narrative but at the same time distinguish between the USA and Europe, which in some contexts is presented positively.

8.1 Externally Motivated Activities

- NATO (the West) attacked Russia using Ukraine, is responsible for the ongoing war there, and by provoking mighty Russia may bring a nuclear catastrophe upon the world;
- The USA (or the West) is responsible for destabilizing the world and numerous wars, imperialism, and colonialism;
- The USA and the West are losing international significance in favor of BRICS, Russia, China, and Iran, and therefore conduct aggressive policies (provoking wars) to maintain their position;
- The USA/West supports Israel and is responsible for the genocide of Palestinians and massacres in Lebanon;

- Western democracy is a lie meant to justify the killing of innocent people and the imperialist policy of the USA as well as interfering in the internal affairs of other states;
- The West falsifies history, especially regarding Russia, and conducts an information war.

8.2 Internally Motivated Activities

- The West spreads moral decay, promotes LGBT and the licentiousness of women, and as such constitutes a threat to civilization, especially to the system of traditional values in Iraq;
- The West is racist and islamophobic and persecutes refugees if they are not white;
- The West needs migrants to work, so it is worthwhile to migrate to Europe;
- The USA/West is responsible for Iraq's economic problems, as it destroyed this country in 2003 to seize Iraqi oil, and economic cooperation with the USA/West is harmful to Iraq, unlike cooperation with Iran, Russia, and China;
- The USA/West supports jihadist terrorists in Iraq and Syria, including being responsible for the creation of ISIS and Al Qaeda, which are tools of the USA/NATO. The USA/NATO invent terrorists because it wants a pretext for invasion. The USA, along with Turkiye, Israel, and Qatar, supported jihadists in Syria because they want to weaken the "anti-Zionist resistance axis."

8.3 Examples of activities

A. Narrative of Ambassador Elbrus Kutrashev – examples

1. Interview for al-Sharqiyah TV from 24/10/2024:
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yAmBlxiYN4>):
 - It was not the USA, but Russia that helped defeat ISIS in Iraq. The USA only blackmailed Iraq with the threat of ISIS.
 - The West, which caused two world wars, is currently striving to attack Russia.
 - Ukraine seeks to escalate the war because it benefits financially from it.
 - The same countries that caused World War II have now planned a war against Russia.

2. Interview for Al Ahad TV, 13/11/2024
<https://alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=206544>

- The USA wants at all costs to block Iraq's accession to BRICS and therefore blackmails Iraq with an attack on it, as well as by reactivating ISIS. In this context, Kutrashev claimed that it is the USA, not the Syrian Kurds, who control prisons in Northeastern Syria where ISIS terrorists are held, and Americans will use them if they consider their interests threatened. This message appeared in the Al Ahad interview but was also repeated by other media, e.g., almasalah.com.
- Putin supplied Iraq with aircraft and tanks during the war against ISIS, after America refused.
- America wants to control Iraqi airspace to use it for the benefit of its allies, and Israeli planes penetrated Iraqi airspace with US support; American interventions hinder Russian armament of Iraq and prevent its supply with the S-400 system.
- Russia doubts the intentions of the US president-elect Donald Trump regarding ending the Russia-Ukraine war because although Trump wants to change something in the region, America is a country of powerful lobbies that impose their will on the president. Internal pressures forced Trump to take hostile steps against Russia; Trump wants to stop the Russia-Ukraine war, but American lobbies selling weapons and gas profit from the economic weakening of Europe. Some American lobbying groups want to destroy Russian-European relations.
- The keys to Ukraine are in America's hands, and the Russia-Ukraine war would not have happened without bad American policy.
- Previously, pragmatic relations existed between Russia and the USA, which allowed solving crisis situations, including in Israeli-Palestinian relations, but the USA attacked Russia in Ukraine and that caused the end of these mechanisms, and as a result, the war of Israel with Palestine and Lebanon.

B. The West is degenerate (in this narrative, Shia media excel; it basically does not appear in Kurdish media, especially those such as Rudaw, Kurdistan24, NRT, or Xendan)

- Al Ghadeer, 16/06/2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t87igMcooq4> — America supports homosexuality in Iraq.
- Al Ssaa, 22/06/2023, <https://alssaa.com/post/show/18614> — After declaring America a "gay state"... Iraqis fear a new invasion with abnormal ideas.
- Al Nujaba, 28/04/2024, <https://alnujaba.co/cartoon/20484> — "Western institutions as well as American and European ambassadors and some mercenaries of political media have recognized promoting sexual corruption in Iraqi society as one of their priorities and negatively react to all measures aimed at fighting moral deviations and homosexuality."

- Al Ahad, 19/09/2024, Civilization failure of the nation and a system of ruling corruption – vision of the future — about Europeans, Americans, and Jews having developed a network of Masonic lodges and Jewish cabala in Iraq, which led to civilizational decline. <https://www.alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=201702>.
- Al Ahad, 29/07/2024, "Pastor of the Chaldean Church Martoma said to Al-Ahed: What happened during the opening of the Olympic Games in Paris offended the whole world." <https://alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=198301>.
- Al Ahad, 28/11/2024, Europe will fall without Russian scientists, <https://alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=208023> — material in which the head of the Russian think tank Kurtatovsky, Mikhail Kovalchuk, stated that "all of Europe is 'falling' except Russian scientists who have been banned from joint projects" and that "at one time, Europe's scientific program practically arose thanks to Russia's contribution."

C. Islamophobic West – provocation with Quran burning – Information about the burning of the Quran in Sweden by the Iraqi refugee Salwan Momika echoed widely in the Iraqi infosphere and was used to build the image of an Islamophobic West and to show that freedom of speech in Europe is exploited for Islamophobic purposes; examples of information:

- TV Al Ghad, 29/09/2023, in a news item (sourced from Sputnik), it was emphasized that "Swedish authorities issued a permit to burn a copy of the Quran in front of a mosque in the capital, Stockholm, on the first day of Eid al-Adha," <https://alghad.com/Section-106/1353419-العراق-يتلقى-رسالة-من-السويد-بعد-واقعة-حرق-القرآن>
- Kurdistan24, Burning of the holy Quran once again in Sweden worries Muslims, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ckb/story/238723>; this material emphasized that the court issued a permit for the provocation but also quoted Swedish Muslims complaining that Sweden wants to ban wearing headscarves but allows burning the Quran; Vladimir Putin was also quoted, emphasizing that "in Russia, disrespect for the Quran is a crime," and in "other countries religious feelings are not respected."

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=801831171731720&id=100057145342502&set=a.697210055527166>



Iraqi cartoon, „International and Islamic condemnation of the burning of the Holy Quran and iraqi flag in Sweden", Facebook, 23/07/2023,
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=801831171731720&id=100057145342502&set=a.697210055527166>

Materials on “Islamophobia” in Europe have also appeared on Al Jazeera TV, for example:

[ارتفاع-كبير-في-الكراهية-ضد-المسلمين-في](https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/10/24/ارتفاع-كبير-في-الكراهية-ضد-المسلمين-في)

“Islamophobia – the suffering of Muslims in Western democracies”

[الإسلاموفوبيا-معاناة-المسلمين-في](https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2016/4/19/الإسلاموفوبيا-معاناة-المسلمين-في)

The narrative concerning Western Islamophobia is promoted by Russian Arabic-language media, contrasting it with the image of Russia as fighting against Islamophobia:

Sputnik Arabic, Putin: "The rising manifestations of Islamophobia worldwide are the result of the policies of certain elites," 14/12/2023,
<https://sarabic.ae/20241212/1095738536-البيت-الأبيض-يعلق-على-تحليق-مسيرات-غامضة-فوق-نيو-جيرسي.html>

Another material about Islamophobia in Europe:

Iraqi Center for Documenting Extremist Crimes (associated with the Al Abbas shrine);

<https://iraqicenter-fdec.org/من-نحن>

However, this analysis is not marked by hostility towards the West and its values, such as democracy, freedom, and tolerance; on the contrary, it points out that Muslim extremists who create a negative image of Islam are also responsible for Islamophobia.

Meanwhile, Russia is presented as an ally in the fight against Islamophobia:

WAA Agency, Russia initiates a statement against Islamophobia, 5/12/2023,
<https://al-iraqinews.com/archives/447460>

D. The image of the West and the USA in the context of ongoing conflicts (the war in the Middle East and the war in Ukraine): especially in pro-Iranian Shia media (but not only), there is a tendency to portray Russia as strong and invincible; Ukraine as losing and exploited by the West; the West as aggressive and provoking the outbreak of a nuclear conflict; in the context of the Middle East war, the West is linked with Israel's actions, which are unequivocally presented negatively as criminal (however, in this context, the image of Europe is sometimes somewhat more positive, while the main attack is directed at the USA).

CHAPTER 9. Propaganda activities aimed at the perception of Poland

Poland is not perceived in Iraq as an enemy country. Its participation in the occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2010 also does not affect the perception of Poland, because anti-American circles were not interested in the role played during that period by countries other than the USA (and possibly Great Britain), so in their resentments they omit other entities as irrelevant. The history of economic cooperation in the 1970s and 1980s also has little significance for the perception of Poland, due to a generational exchange (over 70% of Iraqis are under 35 years old), although it could influence the building of a positive image.

The negative portrayal of Poland in Iraqi media primarily results from two issues. First, it is an element of Russian activities, within which resentments towards the USA are exploited by associating Poland with the USA to inspire a negative narrative about Poland. This is not about the narrative concerning Polish-American relations, but about cognitive influence: associating Poland with the USA is meant to arouse dislike of Poland among certain groups, undermine its credibility, and transfer stereotypes regarding the USA (aggressiveness, warmongering, etc.) onto it. Second, this is an effect of the immaturity of Iraqi media, including Kurdish media, which often unknowingly publish “sensational” news that may portray Poland in a bad light. Additionally, Iraqi, including Kurdish, outlets use Russian and Chinese sources (RT, Sputnik, CGTN, Xinhua) without sufficient awareness of their disinformation character. This secondary disinformation results more from a lack of resilience than from conscious policy.

9.1 Externally Motivated Narratives

Most negative externally motivated narratives concern Poland's role in the war in Ukraine, Polish-Russian relations, and are partly a reflection of the negative perception of the USA, with which Poland is associated. They primarily result from Russian propaganda activities, particularly the media activity of the Russian ambassador Elbrus Kutrashvili and the sourcing of news from Russian agencies.

1. Poland is an aggressive country, inciting war in Ukraine, provoking Russia, and exposing the world to a nuclear conflict.
2. Poland is not an independent state but a puppet in the hands of the USA, which pursues aggressive policies and incites wars worldwide.
3. Poland is a revisionist state aiming to seize Western Ukraine.

4. The migration route through Belarus and Poland makes it easy to get to Germany (this narrative is seemingly contradictory to the narrative about killings carried out by Poland on migrants, but its goal is to stimulate migration flow, while the narrative about executions aims to incite hatred toward Poland; moreover, this narrative is mainly spread in non-traditional media, though exceptionally it can also be found in traditional media, e.g., Rudaw – Europe awaits migrants – <https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/world/291120246>).

9.2 Internally Motivated Narratives

Internally motivated narratives are similar to those concerning the entire West, i.e., they focus on the issues of migration and axiology. Information fitting these narratives appears more often on social media than in mainstream media, although the latter sometimes also use them.

1. Poland is a racist and Islamophobic country that accepted Ukrainian refugees because they are white, while treating refugees from Iraq, especially Iraqi Kurds, brutally and being responsible for their deaths, including committing murders against them.
2. Poland is a demoralized country, like the entire West.

9.3 Examples of actions

1. Poland conducts mass executions of Iraqi refugees – January and June 2022

Conducted in two stages – after the defection of a Chechen, reports appeared that he had "confessed" to killing 240 migrants, including many from Iraq; in June, following manipulation involving the release by Belarusian propaganda of false information about Belarus allegedly handing over to Iraq "evidence" of mass executions carried out by Polish border services, this resonated widely in the Iraqi infosphere. This information was publicized both by Iraqi and pan-Arab media, and the denial was weak and unconvincing. There was a lack of response from Poland in the Iraqi media, and the entire manipulation was part of internal conflict in Iraq (an attack on the government for not reacting). Paradoxically, there was less information on this topic in Kurdish media (although the matter mainly concerned Kurds), and the coverage that did appear was more subdued than in Arab media, which was related to the fact that the migration issue from Kurdistan was inconvenient for the Regional authorities. After Mohammed al-Sudani took power in Iraq, the amount of disinformation related to migration decreased in major media and rather the dangers associated with migration began to be emphasized.

- Al-Alam, 22/06/2022, Belarus provides Iraq with evidence regarding executions of refugees, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demands an international investigation.
<https://www.alalam.ir/news/6235488/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1>

%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7

- Shafaq, 22/06/2022, The Parliament demands an investigation into the issue of executions of Iraqi refugees by Poland and the internationalization of this matter., <https://shafaq.com/ar/سياسة/البرلمان-يطالب-بالتحقيق-في-عدام-بولندا-للاج-ين-عراقيين-وتدويل-القضية>
- Irfaasawtak.com, 14/01/2022, information about beatings of Yazidi refugees by Polish services, <https://www.irfaasawtak.com/iraq/2022/01/14/بين-بيلاروسيا-وبولندا-مهاجرون-إيزيديون-يواجهون-البرد-والجوع-ويعودون-خالي-الوقاض>
- Al-Awla, 24/06/2022, Crimes against Iraqi refugees, and Iraqi authorities remain silent, <https://www.awla.news/poland-iraq/>
- Al Jazeera, 24/06/2022, Shock after reports about alleged executions of Iraqi refugees in Poland, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pROx90FXOjY>
- Al Sumaria, 21/06/2022, Belarus reveals mass executions of Arab refugees, among them are Iraqis, https://www.facebook.com/alsumariatv/posts/5564862806905229/?locale=ms_MY&_rdr
- Al Afaq, 22/06/2022, <https://afaq.iq/contents/view/details?id=169968>, Belarus provides Iraq with evidence regarding the executions of refugees, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs demands an international investigation.
- Al Rafidain, 22/06/2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs shirks responsibility after revelations of executions of Iraqi refugees in Poland, <https://alrafidain.tv/42103/الخارجية-تتهرب-من-المسؤولية-بعد-كشف-عم>
- Al Sabah, 23/06/2022, denial of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which, however, it was emphasized that the information cannot be verified, so the possibility that they are true was left open, and it was also added that 'Poland and Belarus committed many injustices' against the citizens of Iraq;
- Al Ahad (a television associated with the leader of the Shia militia AAH al-Chazalim) also reported a denial - <https://alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=128172>; nevertheless, on 20/12/2021 Al Ahad cited Amnesty International claiming that the Polish military beats and throws refugees into the river.
- Facebook account Ishtarforimmigrationandasylum, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=496653018942852>, - about the Czezko grave in Belarus (17/09/2022)

- Rased Iraqi (according to al maalomah) Polish soldier admits to killing 240 migrants on the border with Belarus, <https://rasediraqi.com/148998/جندي-بولندي-يعترف-بقتل-240-مهاجرا-على-الحدود-مع-بلاروسيا>
- Rudaw, 22/06/2022, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is investigating whether Iraqi migrants were exposed to life-threatening risks.
- Accusation of racism (accepting Ukrainians and sending back Iraqis); <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2757227841240040>
- Kurdistan CT (account of the Kurdistan counter-terrorism service, 7.2 million followers) – information about the 'Belarus report' concerning executions; <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2269629739868862&id=399110903587431&set=a.429709253860929>
- Iraqi Media Network Magazine, 30/06/2022, Horrors related to acts of Iraqi migrants expose the behavior of Poland - the article aggressively attacks Poland in the context of accepting refugees from Ukraine, accusing racism and applying double standards of human rights, in connection with the 'cruel' treatment of migrants from Iraq; the complete lack of any mention that the difference lies in the fact that Iraqis are not fleeing war is all the more striking since it is published in an Iraqi state media outlet <https://magazine.imn.iq/منوعة/فضائح-ملف-المهاجرين-العراقيين-تعري-سل/>
- Repetition of disinformation despite the denial of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 'It is worth mentioning that the winter of 2021 saw an unprecedented wave of migration to Belarus, and then to Poland, during which migrants were exposed to various kinds of hunger, thirst, cold, and even acts of violence by officers of the Polish Border Guard. Furthermore, the Iraqi delegation recently discussed with Belarusian authorities the evidence provided by the latter concerning the exposure of Iraqi immigrants to violence and the killing of many of them on the Polish border. On their part, the Poles remained silent about the documented reports of attacks carried out by Polish security services on Iraqis and even refrained from commenting on documented official and unofficial investigations, statements and commissions confirming that Iraqis were attacked and left to die without assistance, which within the designated time would have contributed to saving several dozen of them”.
- Baghdad Today, 08/11/2021 – Russia accuses Poland of participating in the destruction of Iraq, citing Zakharova, who linked the appearance of migrants on the Belarus-Poland border to the intervention in 2003, <https://baghdadtoday.news/170684-.html>

2. Various information, often of a sensational nature, creating a negative image of Poland.

They often come from Russian sources. Sometimes they are true, however, the problem is that they do not get lost among other news about Poland (because there is a limited amount of them and a certain overrepresentation of negative 'sensations'):

- Al Maalomah, 28/08/2022, Will Poland face famine?,
<https://almaalomah.me/news/global/هل-ستعرض-بولندا-الى-مجاعة-صحيفة-تحذ/>
- RT Arabic, 20/11/2024, mocking Poland,
<https://x.com/rtarabiciraq/status/1859197499640356924>
- Chaw about "Polish children drinking vodka", 09/10/2024 r.,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_x2dePufpY,

3. Examples of actions of Ambassador Elbrus Kutrashev:

- In an interview for Al Sharqiyah television (24/10/2024), he spoke about Poland and the Baltic states as small Russophobic countries and a tool for weakening Europe by the USA; only Russia calls for calming the situation both in Europe and in the Middle East. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yAmBlxiYN4>;

4. Poland as a warmonger and obstacle to the Western agreement with Russia

- Al Ahad - in the material about the conversation between Putin and Scholz: "Attempts to blame Russia for the problems of European energy supplies are ridiculous, considering the obstruction of gas supplies by the authorities of Ukraine and Poland and the refusal to activate Nord Stream-2."
- Sky News Arabia, 17/11/2022, Annexation of Western Ukraine, has Poland begun dividing its neighbor? In the material, which referred to an alleged article from the newspaper "Dziennik," there was talk about a "Polish plan" of annexation, Polish mercenaries in Ukraine, and a plan to introduce a Polish "female battalion."
<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/world/1572182-ضم-غربي-اوكرانيا-بدأت-بولندا-تقسيم-جارتها-؟>
- Shafaq, 21.07.2023, Putin warns Poland against occupying Ukrainian lands and reminds of Stalin,
<https://www.shafaq.com/ar/عربي-ودولي/بوتين-يحذر-بولندا-من-اقتطاع-ارض-اوكرانية-ويذكر-ها-بستالين>
- In the context of the opening of the American base in Redzikowo, a series of reports appeared suggesting "that the new missile defense base established by the United States in northern Poland will increase the overall level of nuclear threat"; e.g., aliraqnews.com; <https://www.ishtartv.com/>; <https://baghdadtoday.news/>

- INA, 8.11.2024, <https://www.ina.iq/220943--.html>, narrative about "mercenaries in Ukraine" coming among others from Poland: "fighters from Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, and Canada are stationed on the second line of Ukrainian defense in Kharkiv Oblast and operate in groups that prevent Ukrainian soldiers from escaping or surrendering to the Russian army."
- More examples are presented below:



TV Al Awla, „Crimes on Iraqi refugees", 24/06/2022, <https://www.awla.news/poland-iraq/>.

Polska armia traktuje irackich imigrantów pałkami i celowo ich topi

15:40:00 12-21-20



TV Al Ahad, „The Polish army beats Iraqi immigrants with batons and deliberately drowns them”, 20/12/2021, <https://alahad.iq/?page=article&itemId=110013>.



@RRRRRRR273 2 lata temu

Mamy nadzieję, że rząd iracki przekaże te akta właściwym sądom międzynarodowym i nie będzie przyjmował łapówek od Polski ani innych krajów w celu zamknięcia tej sprawy w przyszłości!!

Przetłumacz na angielski



208

Odpowiedz

23 odpowiedzi



@abrahamadam8945 2 lata temu

Kraje Europy Wschodniej i Polska znane są z rasizmu wobec uchodźców i czarnowłosych Polaków. Nienawidzą nawet samych siebie. To ludzie największej podłości i nienawiści do muzułmanów. O Boże, zemść się na nich.

Przetłumacz na angielski



129

Odpowiedz

7 odpowiedzi



@atr4468 2 lata temu

Gdzie jest społeczność międzynarodowa i prawa człowieka, gdzie są wolni Irakijczycy, którzy nie zapominają o krzywdzie bez względu na to, jak długo to zajmie?

Przetłumacz na angielski



64

Odpowiedz

10 odpowiedzi

English translation (translation of the three visible comments above with the highest reach that align with the discussed propaganda and the effect it causes):

1. "We hope the Iraqi government will hand these files over to the proper international courts and will not accept bribes from Poland or other countries to close this case in the future!!"
2. "The countries of Eastern Europe and Poland are known for racism toward refugees and dark-haired Poles. They even hate themselves. These are people of the greatest baseness and hatred toward Muslims. Oh God, take revenge on them."
3. "Where is the international community and human rights—where are free Iraqis who will not forget the wrong, no matter how long it takes?"

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=496653018942852> : Deserter accused of espionage Emil Czecko is still being used to sow discord even after his death.



międzynarodowy

Czy Polska dotknie głód? .. Gazeta ostrzega

sierpnia 2022 21:57 28



...Informacje/Kontynuuj

Gazeta Politico ostrzegała przed śmiertelnym głodem, na jaki narażona będzie Polska w ciągu najbliższych dwóch tygodni, związanym ze wzrostem cen gazu i

Al Maalomah, „Will Poland face famine?”, 28/08/2022,
<https://almaalomah.me/news/global/> هل-ستتعرض-بولندا-الى-مجاعة-صحيفة-تحذر.

: Cechy planu polskiego

W ciągu ostatnich kilku dni zachodnie i polskie media donosiły, że [Warszawa](#) uruchomiła plan odzyskania „historycznych ziem” z Ukrainy

Jak podaje polska gazeta „Żenik”, w niedawnym raporcie Warszawa rozpoczęła : realizację pierwszej fazy planu, która obejmuje

- Wprowadzenie batalionu Polek na Ukrainę jako najemników
- Na Ukrainie walczy obecnie około 1800 polskich ochotników
- Warszawa podzieli część terytorium ze swoimi sąsiadami
- Polscy najemnicy stacjonują na całej linii frontu
- Polscy bojownicy są obecni niemal we wszystkich głównych jednostkach armii ukraińskiej

Sky News Arabia, „Annexation of Western Ukraine, has Poland begun dividing its neighbor?”, 17/11/2022,

<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/world/1572182-ضم-غربي-أوكرانيا-بدأت-بولندا-تقسيم-جارتها؟>

English translation (*translation of the slide “Features of the Polish plan” visible above, which aligns with the discussed propaganda*):

“Features of the Polish plan:

In recent days, Western and Polish media have reported that Warsaw launched a plan to recover “historic lands” from Ukraine.

According to the Polish newspaper “Żenik”, in a recent report Warsaw began implementing the first phase of the plan, which includes:

- Introducing a battalion of Polish women into Ukraine as mercenaries.
- About 1,800 Polish volunteers are currently fighting in Ukraine.
- Warsaw will divide part of the territory with its neighbors.
- Polish mercenaries are stationed along the entire front line.
- Polish fighters are present in almost all major units of the Ukrainian army.”

CHAPTER 10. Case Study — analysis of the narrative aimed against Poland based on the DISARM model

10.1 Framework DISARM RED — an attempt to standardize the method of description and exchange of information concerning activities in the information space

History of the DISARM RED framework

DISARM RED (DISinformation Analysis & Risk Management RED) is an analytical model used to describe offensive activities in the information space (infosphere). One of the main challenges in analyzing these activities is the great conceptual heterogeneity. Entities dealing with the study and counteraction of threats in this domain have developed their own vocabularies and semantics for describing these types of activities. Along with the steadily increasing intensity of multidomain informational activities since the mid-2010s, which also include influence operations, there arose a need for reliable information exchange between entities involved in identifying and combating such threats.

At the turn of 2017 and 2018, Sara-Jayne “SJ” Terp, together with a group of cybersecurity specialists, began work on adapting existing tools describing strictly digital threats to the reality of hybrid operations. Shortly thereafter, the prototype of DISARM was created - the AMITT framework (Adversarial Misinformation Influence Tactics & Techniques), which began to be used by NATO, the EU, WHO, and the UN. The current version of DISARM RED is the result of combining AMITT with the SPICE model created by the MITRE Corporation - modeled on the classic cybersecurity framework MITRE ATT&CK (used for identifying and describing tactics and techniques employed in offensive cyber operations).

DISARM is a fully open-source project, managed by the DISARM Foundation, compatible with the STIX language and the MISP platform, regularly updated to better describe reality and become increasingly compatible with other models such as the Meta Kill Chain.

Basic characteristics of the DISARM RED framework

The DISARM RED framework is divided into several parts, arranged in a specific hierarchy, which describe the individual stages and tools used in influence operations. The model opens with "phases," marked with tags beginning with the letter "P." To these are assigned tactics (tags starting with the letters "TA"), which include various techniques (tags starting with the letter "T").

The "P" tags describe the four main phases of informational activities – planning, preparation, execution, and evaluation. The tactics "TA" included in them indicate the objectives that form part of each phase, which are achieved through the use of various tools, i.e., the "T" techniques. Descriptions of the phases, techniques, and tactics are publicly available on the project's website.

Example of using the DISARM RED framework

The DISARM RED framework is particularly useful as a tool for exchanging information about incidents. It allows one to describe the observed reality easily and uniformly, leaving no room for ambiguity. It works excellently at the first stage of reconnaissance, i.e., the identification of activities in the information space, as well as during attribution analysis, where it serves as a tool for describing characteristic and recurring techniques that can be useful in identifying the author of an influence operation. Its benefit is the aforementioned compatibility with the STIX syntax, which enables its application on platforms such as Open CTI.

An example use of DISARM is a situation in which an analyst identifies a network of inauthentic accounts on a social media platform spreading the same meme that legitimizes a narrative previously present in another medium, e.g., an online portal. Thanks to the framework, it is possible to specify, name, and classify the used techniques, assign them to tactics, and then pass this information to another analyst, who can further enrich the product within the intelligence cycle.

Limitations of the DISARM RED framework

The DISARM RED framework is a precise and useful tool, but one must be aware of its limitations. While it works well in describing and reporting individual incidents in the information space, as well as classifying digital evidence gathered during OSINT investigations, it lacks elements that more precisely describe the psychological effects caused by a given activity and is too distant from analytical models used in assessing psychological operations.

DISARM RED limits the description of psychological impact to a dozen or so techniques in phase 1 – planning. The framework describes them as ways to achieve a given tactical-level goal, whereas in reality the aforementioned techniques are both a tool and a goal in themselves – contained within a much wider range of psychological influence used by entities acting as attackers in influence operations.

10.2 Russian influence operation conducted in the information space of Iraq: Creating a false image of Poland and the West as aggressors striving to annex Ukrainian territories

Analysis of the Russian influence operation conducted in the information space of Iraq according to the DISARM RED framework v 1.6

Monitored period: October - December 2024

Monitored media: internet portals, social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, X), messengers (Telegram)

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin has consistently used disinformation as one of the key tools to "legitimize" its aggression policy.

Russian propaganda, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, is based on a deliberate narrative structure aimed at manipulating audiences by mixing facts with fiction, emotional appeals, and creating a false historical background.

The analysis reveals current disinformation techniques and narrative mechanisms used in this specific infosphere. One of the latest examples is the widely spread narrative about alleged Western plans to divide Ukraine.

The Russian propaganda apparatus continues its disinformation operation, whose leading narratives rely on theses about plans to annex Western Ukraine by Poland, Hungary, and Romania. During media monitoring in the Iraqi infosphere, content was encountered that fits the narrative that "Poland is supposedly preparing to annex and occupy parts of Ukraine." The mentioned materials are consistent with a longstanding Russian-attributed influence operation aimed at discrediting Poland in Ukraine and on the international stage and portraying it as an aggressive country seeking to "rebuild the Second Polish Republic."

TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES USED ACCORDING TO DISARM v1.6

PHASE	TACTICS	TECHNIQUES	DESCRIPTION
P01 - Plan	TA02 - Plan Objectives	T0066 - Degrade Adversary	Russia uses narratives that portray Poland in a bad light and undermine its reputation.
		T0138 - Motivate to act	Poland is presented as an aggressor and a country seeking to seize Ukrainian lands. This is meant to distort the image of Poland in the eyes of Iraqis and citizens of other countries and to arouse their aversion towards the Republic of Poland.
		T0135 - Undermine	Poland is depicted as a country that 'owes something to Russia,' which in fact has been for many centuries one of the main threats to Polish statehood—from the times of the Tsars, through the Soviet era, up to the present Putin era.
P02 - Prepare	TA07 - Select Channels and Affordances	T0152.004 - Website Asset	Websites with Russian or pro-Russian affiliation (RT, Sputnik Arabic). Pan-Arab media such as SkyNews, Erem News, and Iraqi media.
	TA14 - Develop Narratives	T0003 - Leverage Existing Narratives	Suggesting that Poland has plans to attack Ukraine and occupy parts of its territory.
		T0022 - Leverage Conspiracy Theory Narratives	Promoting the thesis that Poland intends to carry out a 'soft annexation' of Western Ukraine. Spreading false 'evidence' of Poland's offensive militarization and sending peacekeeping forces to take over part of Ukrainian territory.
	TA06 - Develop Content	T0023 - Distort Facts	Placing articles in the media quoting Russian and Arab 'experts and analysts' who cite 'evidence' of Poland's nefarious plans.

		T0085 - Develop Text-Based Content	Publishing maps showing the territories of the Second Polish Republic in an appropriate context, which additionally reinforces the message about Poland's 'aggressive intentions.' Distorting reality by selectively presenting facts taken out of context and quoting them in a way that makes the anti-Polish narrative more plausible.
		T0086 - Develop Image-Based Content	
	TA15 - Establish Assets	T0095 - Develop Owned Media Assets	Utilizing Russian propaganda platforms with international and pan-Arab reach, such as RT and Sputnik Arabic
	TA16 - Establish Legitimacy	T0100 - Co-Opt Trusted Sources	Utilizing Russian propaganda platforms with international and pan-Arab reach, such as RT and Sputnik Arabic.
		T0097.105 Military Personnel Persona	https://www.skynewsarabia.com/world/1572182 - ضم-غربي-أوكرانيا-بدأت-بولندا-تقسيم-جارتها؟ or Shafaq: https://www.shafaq.com/ar/ - عربي-ود-ولي/بوتين-يحذر-بولندا-من-اقتطاع-ارض-وكرانيا-ويذكر-هابستالين
		T0097.108 - Expert Persona	Quoting Putin's statements and emphasizing the role of Sergey Naryshkin (head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service - SVR).
		T0097.111 - Government Official Persona	Using the 'authority of experts and analysts' to increase the credibility of 'analyses.'
		T0097.202 News Outlet Persona	
	P03 - Execute	TA09 - Deliver Content	T0115 - Post Content
			Spreading false narratives in the form of articles on websites with Russian or pro-Russian affiliation, but also Iraqi and pan-Arab.

Summary

The current phase of this campaign suggests that Poland, Hungary, Romania, and other Western countries are already "planning" the division of Ukraine into specific territories. By attributing alleged preparations for annexation conducted by NATO, the propaganda attempts to discredit Western support for Ukraine and embed these theses within disinformation about NATO's offensive plans.

These narratives are simultaneously used in propaganda activities that portray Russia in a false light as a state defending itself rather than one militarily attacking Ukraine (a strategy of inverted logic).

Russia consistently uses rhetoric comparing Ukraine and the West to Nazism. Such references are meant to provoke an emotional response and "legitimize" Russian disinformation about aggression against Ukraine as a "denazification" operation or, more broadly, as a defensive operation against the West—suggesting that Western actions are provocative and offensive, leading to conflict.

Understanding these mechanisms allows not only better analysis of propaganda but also more effective defense against it. Therefore, we recommend this analytical model also to Iraqi institutions and NGOs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Summary of the information environment along with psychological vulnerabilities

The information environment in Iraq is very complex due to the ethno-sectarian social and political structure. Most media are closely linked not only to specific ethno-sectarian groups (primarily Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds) but also to particular political parties/leaders and serve their interests in their narratives. This means that Iraq experiences media pluralism (media are not subordinated to a single political line or narrative) but not full freedom (certain media depend on their political patrons, and fully independent operation is difficult both for security and financial reasons). The number of media outlets (especially TV stations and internet portals) is very large and has increased in recent years. Their professionalism is also improving (especially visually, but not always technically), particularly in Kurdish media.

From a professional point of view, there are several key problems affecting the credibility of the message and increasing susceptibility to external influence. This particularly concerns uncritical use of Russian and Chinese agency sources and reporting based on them without considering that they are often part of disinformation (e.g., regarding the war in Ukraine). Another problem is negative information selection, i.e., the tendency to present 'sensational' information about the West that creates its negative image. This stems from a certain complex toward the West, where media for years mainly reported bad news about Iraq (terrorism, war, extremism, etc.), so now Iraq (its media) show that the West, which is inclined to lecture others, is not ideal. Another issue is the lack of custom of indicating the sponsored nature of some publications (particularly concerning China), as well as the lack of challenging the interlocutor in some interviews (especially interviews with the Russian ambassador, where his monologues based on absurd manipulations are met only with agreement from the interviewers).

Psychological sensitivities and stereotypes rooted in historical memory have a huge impact on the message. This particularly concerns the multigenerational trauma caused by decades of war and isolation of Iraq, as well as a sense of grievance based on the contrast between Iraq's glorious history as the cradle of civilization, the center of the Abbasid Caliphate, the origin place of prophets and imams, and the most developed state in the region in the mid-20th century, etc., and the current reality marked by numerous economic, political, and social problems. This problem mainly affects the Arab part, whereas in the case of Kurdistan, the key psychological factor is related to unfulfilled national aspirations. In both cases, this leads to a sense of grievance and a search for blame outside Iraq, especially in the West. The susceptibility to Russian and Chinese actions exploiting this sense of grievance stems from the lack of historical experience with Russian and Chinese imperialism and colonialism, especially in recent history. This hinders building resilience against influence operations from these countries because there is no awareness of their harmfulness to Iraq. Moreover, they exploit historical burdens associated with some Western countries (particularly the USA, and secondarily Great Britain) in the perception of Iraqis to extrapolate negative sentiments to the entire West (based on the construct of the 'collective West') and to undermine the credibility of Western institutional actions, including in exposing Russian and Chinese influence operations.

Russian and Chinese activities have a huge impact on the information environment, aiming to gain influence in specific environments or on specific individuals through personal contacts, corruption, academic scholarships, joint business projects, etc. Considering the lack of media independence from their political patrons, building such ties at the political level leads to imposing certain narratives on journalists. China also tries to directly influence the journalistic environment by organizing various kinds of meetings and inviting them to visit China. China is also significantly more subtle in its messaging than Russia, and the awareness among Iraqis, including Kurds, of China conducting influence operations is much lower than in the case of Russia.

2. Strategic analysis

The geopolitical significance of Iraq is difficult to overestimate. Key transit projects intersect there, such as the route leading from the Persian Gulf through Türkiye to Europe, and from Iran through Syria to the Mediterranean Sea, which have both economic and political importance. Iraq's role goes far beyond its position in the oil market and potentially also in the gas market, although the latter is also of great significance. Recent history has shown that the situation in Iraq, particularly the issue of the stability of this state, has a huge impact on the security of Europe, including Poland. This concerns both the terrorist threat, which increased in Europe during Iraq's war with ISIS, and uncontrolled migration, which is instrumentalized by Russia and Belarus as part of a hybrid attack on Europe, especially Poland. Iraq is a country with enormous potential not only because of its natural resources and location but also its demographics. A very young population of 45.5 million, as well as projections of its growth to 72 million by 2050, mean that, with skillful use of this potential, Iraq can quickly regain a significant role in international relations as a regional power. Otherwise, it may become a center of destabilization not only in the region but also neighboring Europe, a source of massive migratory flows, and a stronghold of extremist and terrorist groups. Unmanaged demographic surpluses mean millions of young unemployed people, as well as hordes of young men living with sexual tension due to lack of financial means to start families. This, in turn, leads to aggression: riots, terrorist activity, or militarization of young men and their involvement in some armed actions (which increases the likelihood of a regional conflict in the perspective of several to dozen years).

Poland cannot afford to ignore both the threats and opportunities related to Iraq. This also applies to the negative effects of Russian and Chinese propaganda in the form of creating a negative image of the West as an enemy of Islam, in order to spread hatred among Iraqi Muslims (this is, moreover, part of a broader operation in the Arab-Muslim world) towards the West. Building such sentiments does not discourage migration if its economic and political causes do not cease, but it negatively affects relations between Europe and Iraq (or more broadly the Middle East) and increases the threat of Muslim extremism in Europe, including in Poland. The relationship between Iraqi internal problems and Russian operations in Europe is clearly seen in the example of the burning of the Quran in Sweden by the Iraqi migrant Salwan Momika or the attempt to stir up anti-Polish sentiments in Iraq through the case of Emil Czezcza and the alleged executions of Iraqis by Polish soldiers.

Despite actions aimed at damaging Poland's image, it still has considerable potential to develop cooperation with Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region. However, Poland's activities should not

be limited to Kurdish areas, and the Polish diplomatic presence in Iraq should be expanded. A significant improvement in security throughout Iraq means that many reasons for limiting this presence have become outdated. Furthermore, in the perception of Iraqis, there are no historical burdens concerning Poland (participation in the 2003 intervention and subsequent occupation is irrelevant in this context). Poland can maintain relations with all entities across the broad political spectrum of Iraq, also influencing the reduction of tensions between them. The lack of burdens in perception also increases credibility in responding to Russian and Chinese influence operations. Another aspect is the development of economic cooperation, especially in the construction sector, which, however, is not possible without expanding diplomatic presence and credible non-governmental organizations active in this area. Cooperation in combating illegal migration is also of significant importance, which is also a negative phenomenon from Iraq's point of view. Iraq loses its human capital this way, and Iraqis, enticed by prosperity in the West, often regret migration after confronting reality and try to return to Iraq, which is complicated by the fact that they often lost their lifelong savings on such an endeavor.

3. Summary of the Russian message in the region

The Russian message focuses on demonizing the West and reinforcing related negative stereotypes, using psychological sensitivities and historical resentments, as well as identity-cultural-religious fears. Based on these factors, an image of the West is constructed as, first, aggressive and destructive, spreading chaos and destabilization; second, demoralized, racist, and Islamophobic, posing a threat to traditional Islamic values, family, honor, and religion; and third, greedy, aiming to take control over Iraq's natural resources without benefits for the country and its society, following a colonial model.

Currently, these goals are mainly pursued through narratives concerning topics such as the war in Ukraine, the war in the Middle East, alleged Western connections with jihadism, frightening themes like LGBT, bombarding with news about racist and Islamophobic incidents in Europe, and spreading disinformation about alleged executions of Iraqi migrants. The Russian narrative is often shockingly absurd and not fully reflected even in the most susceptible Shiite media; nevertheless, this does not mean these actions should be underestimated, as they are carried out consistently and intensively enough to gradually influence the subconscious of recipients. In this context, the extraordinary activity (in the form of interviews, conference appearances, and meetings with influential persons) of the Russian ambassador Elbrus Kutrashv stands out. The war in Ukraine, according to this narrative, is presented as an element of aggressive Western actions against Russia, and Ukraine is reduced solely to a helpless tool of attack. This narrative often uses anti-American (and, to some extent, anti-Western) stereotypes related to the occupation of Iraq, as well as the colonial role of Great Britain in the first half of the 20th century. Regarding the war in the Middle East, Russia tries to associate the "collective West" with the military actions of Israel and thereby attribute responsibility for "genocide," as well as portray it as an enemy of Islam. Russia contrasts this with its own image as the alleged patron of the Palestinian cause and friend of the Islamic world. Related to this is also the building of a contrast based on a false image of Europe persecuting the Muslims living there and Russia, where Islam is supposedly an integral part of identity. Additionally, Russian propaganda tries to attribute responsibility to the West for ISIS activity, suggesting that it was created by the USA to intimidate and control Iraq.

The effectiveness of Russian propaganda varies among different ethno-sectarian components of Iraq. Moreover, the image of Europe, especially countries such as Poland, is significantly better than that of the USA, even among the components most prejudiced against the West (e.g., pro-Iranian Shiite groups). This provides an opportunity to undertake effective actions exposing Russian manipulations and revealing the imperial-colonial nature of Russia, as well as the racism and Islamophobia rooted in and tolerated by its authorities and security services. Strengthening Iraqi resilience to Russian disinformation efforts is also in Iraq's interest. Strengthening prejudices against the West does not promote the development of mutual political and economic relations, and in this regard, Russia has decidedly less to offer than the West, particularly Europe. Contrary to its own propaganda, Russia is not a reliable partner in the field of security: it provided no real support in the war against ISIS, its support for Assad led Syria to ruin and to Assad's downfall, which Russia neither wanted nor was able to prevent. Furthermore, Russian-Israeli cooperation, through which Israel could bomb Iranian positions in Syria (as well as Iraqi Shiite militias supporting Iran there), radically contrasts with the narrative propagated among Iraqi Shiites by Ambassador Elbrus Kutrashvili. This should make Russia's partners in the region aware that cooperation with it is unprofitable.

4. Implementation

The following actions are indicated, justified by the observations and conclusions contained in the report:

- 1) An expert trip to Iraq, aimed at tightening cooperation with local partners and preparing conditions for the establishment of permanent partner centers that will continue monitoring the information environment, counteract manipulations, and increase resilience to them. The trip will cover both the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad, as well as other Arab areas (Shiite and Sunni) of Iraq.
- 2) Organizing an international conference during which this report will be presented. The conference will involve experts, representatives of academia, NGOs, and administration from Poland, Iraq, other countries included in the report (Lebanon, Egypt), as well as other countries in the region.
- 3) Developing (together with local partners) implementation guidelines and best practices;
- 4) Developing (together with local partners) teaching materials for students and conducting those classes;
- 5) Creating a communication channel with local participants (who will establish cooperation as a result of the implementation activities) to create a shared working and mentoring environment;
- 6) Developing, implementing, and evaluating actions and tools in the area of civic and media education on international disinformation and the dangerous use of artificial intelligence techniques (tools: informational materials such as leaflets, code of good practice, white paper on how to approach the use of artificial intelligence in social media), enabling the local community to, for example, formulate proposals/expectations regarding laws and legislation on counteracting disinformation;

- 7) Developing further steps to maintain activity after the completion of the grant project, serving the long-term maintenance of the project's effects.

5. Trainings

The following actions are indicated, justified by the observations and conclusions contained in the report. These actions should be undertaken in several locations in Iraq, including both the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad, as well as other places under the federal administration of Iraq, so that their recipients represent various ethno-sectarian components of Iraq.

- 1) A cycle of trainings on information environment security, including: training on the DISARM model, detection of foreign interference operations (FIMI), fact-checking, and media education;
- 2) Launching a media project that will promote good practices in the field of information environment security and warn about the most important disinformation and propaganda campaigns identified in Iraq;
- 3) Increasing the effectiveness of detecting and neutralizing disinformation and improving the quality of civic education in this area.
- 4) Thanks to the trainings, the project will raise the competencies of academic, research, and media communities in identifying and counteracting disinformation campaigns (including those using artificial intelligence techniques), and will also expose disinformation narratives of foreign actors aimed at the image of Poland, the West, and democratic values.
- 5) Developing, implementing, and evaluating tools in civic and media education on disinformation — The project will provide high-quality reports and materials containing a compilation of recommendations that will promote reliable knowledge and best practices in counteracting disinformation.
- 6) The project foresees the development of a long-term strategy to ensure the durability of the achieved results and the further development of initiatives counteracting disinformation.

6. Information and educational activities

The following actions are indicated, justified by the observations and conclusions contained in the report: informational activity in the media, launching a media project, a cycle of seminars and workshops. These actions aim to reach as widely as possible with information about the project's implementation, inform about its assumptions, schedule, and planned effects, as well as share experience with other entities in various countries involved in the fight against Russian influence operations. The beneficiaries of these actions will be recipients and creators of the information environment and media messages, including decision-makers, experts, journalists, influencers, opinion leaders, academic and research communities (scientific institutes, think tanks), and NGOs. This concerns both the indicated entities in Poland and in allied countries, as well as in those particularly exposed to Russian influence operations.

The media project will promote good practices in the field of information environment security and warn about the most important disinformation and propaganda campaigns identified in the target country. Its result will also be strengthening social resilience to disinformation and building public awareness about the impact of disinformation campaigns on various regions, including Iraq. Cyclical reports and informational campaigns will contribute to increasing the knowledge of the society (both in Europe and Poland as well as in Iraq and other countries exposed to Russian influence operations in the Middle East) regarding the impact of disinformation on the security and stability of the state and region.

Moreover, media activity in the form of television, radio, and press interviews, internet portals, and podcasts will serve to reach broadly understood public opinion, increase its knowledge and resilience, and also serve to strengthen democratic values in Iraq, develop civil society, and foster good Polish-Iraqi relations.

7. Counteracting social polarization

One of the main goals of Russian influence operations is to destabilize the country targeted by the operation by provoking and deepening social polarization. In the context of activities undertaken in Iraq, this applies to both Poland and Iraq. For example, disinformation conducted in Iraq concerning migration, combined with the instrumentalization of the migration flow, leads to the development of radical attitudes in Poland and Europe. A similar effect in Iraq is the radicalization of attitudes towards democratic values as well as the spreading of false information concerning racism, Islamophobia, and the moral decline of the West.

Counteracting these phenomena should especially include dialogue with local communities, including religious ones, and active combating of manipulation and disinformation.

8. Development of R&D in the area of counteracting disinformation and FIMI

- 1) Conducting further empirical research on the methods and actions undertaken by Russia and other entities in the field of disinformation, manipulation, and other influence operations targeting the image of Poland, the West, and democratic values, including analysis of the content of messages in the Iraqi infosphere;
- 2) Increasing the know-how of Iraqi journalists in good practices and resilience to manipulation when using foreign information sources, as well as clearly marking sponsored content;
- 3) Development of analytical tools based on artificial intelligence, including automatic detection of false content, analysis of dissemination patterns, and creation of algorithms for natural language analysis to identify fake news based on language structure, tone, and context.
- 4) Developing international cooperation in counteracting FIMI in Iraq through establishing partnerships with other non-governmental organizations conducting similar activities.
- 5) Developing proposals for new media law regulations serving media freedom and resilience to disinformation in Iraq.

- 6) Developing media programs in Iraq that teach users how to recognize disinformation and verify sources, as well as conducting social campaigns raising awareness about the dangers of disinformation.
- 7) Substantive support for the development of fact-checking platforms in Iraq.
- 8) Conducting further research on the psychology of information reception, including mechanisms of influence on recipients and the impact of a priori beliefs and prejudices on susceptibility to disinformation.

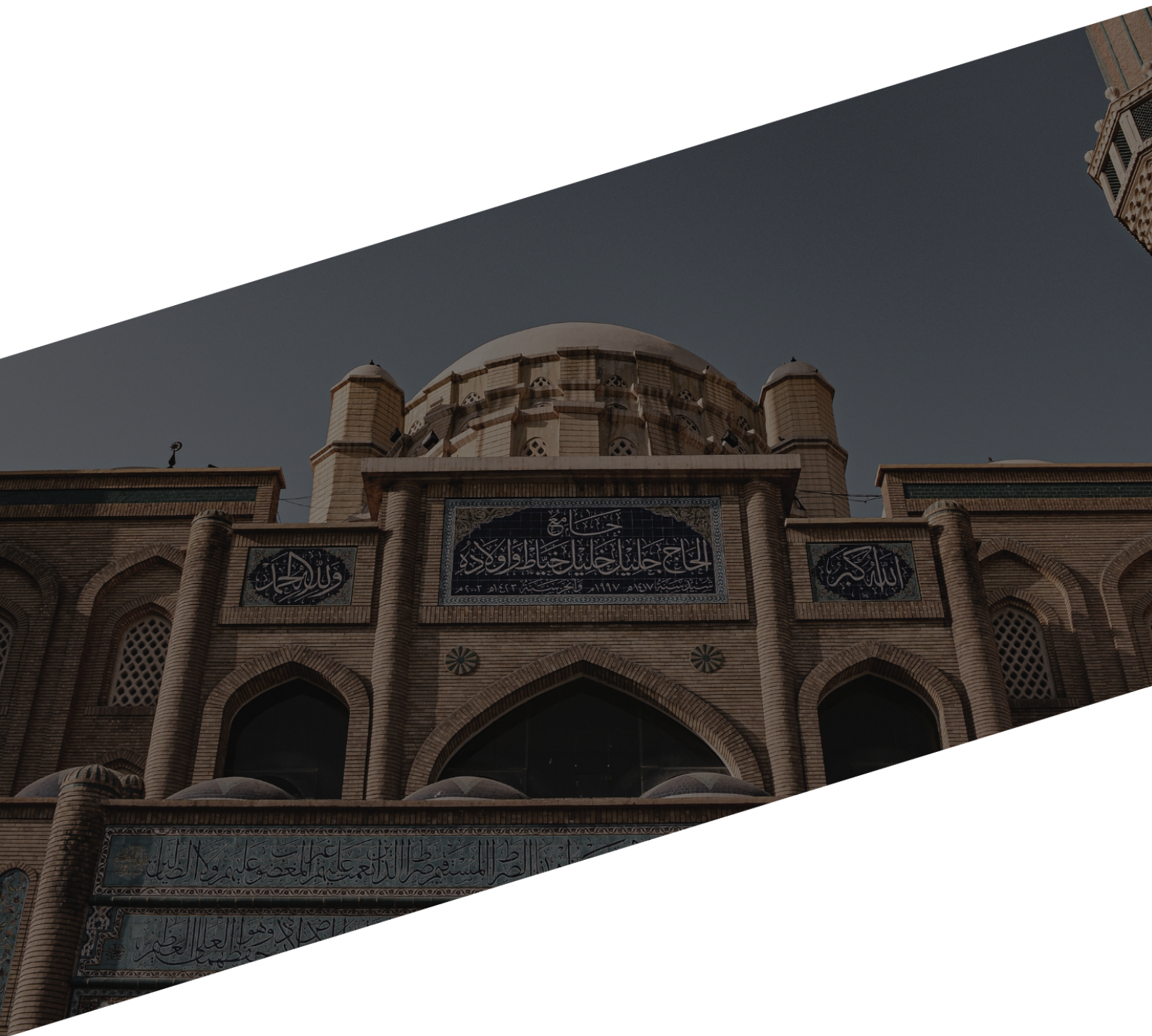
9. Other

- 1) Harmful activity of the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in Iraq, Elbrus Kutrashv, in the area of FIMI, particularly his consistent and intensive actions creating a negative image of the West and the absurd narrative regarding the war in Ukraine, make it necessary to have constant monitoring of his activities combined with rapid response to his subsequent manipulations. This response should include appropriate publications within the Szaffafija project, i.e., on the website and social media, where Kutrashv's manipulations would be deconstructed.
- 2) Due to the significance of the instrumentalization of migration as a security threat to Poland, it is necessary to conduct ongoing monitoring of how this topic is reported in the Iraqi infosphere and to respond quickly to disinformation, including both that encouraging migration and that suggesting Poland commits crimes against Iraqi citizens and other migrants. Leaving such manipulations unanswered does not have a deterrent effect on illegal migration but creates a negative image of Poland and fosters hostility towards Poland, which, especially in the long term, may cause serious harm.
- 3) Due to the limitations related to the size of the diplomatic staff in Iraq, especially at the embassy in Baghdad, it would be advisable to establish a permanent office monitoring the Iraqi infosphere and responding to FIMI operations aimed at the European Union, Poland, Polish-Iraqi relations, and democratic values. Such an office would operate within the framework of non-governmental activities, which would reduce its costs compared to expanding the diplomatic mission.

In summary, Poland's strategic engagement in Iraq and across MENA, coupled with implementing these recommendations, can bolster Iraq's capacity to address security and information threats, counter disinformation, strengthen regional stability, and project Poland as a reliable partner—contributing to a more resilient MENA region.

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Information environment analysis: IRAQ



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