

## **Exploring Disinformation in Fragile States: Iraq as a Case Study of Influence of International Political Actors**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the influence of international political actors in perpetuating disinformation in fragile states, using Iraq as a case study. The advent of modern technology and social media has transformed the global information landscape, providing new avenues for the dissemination of disinformation. This study delves into the history of disinformation in Iraq, particularly during and after the fall of the Baathist regime, and investigates how national and international actors utilise disinformation as a political tool. Through three case studies, the overlapping interests of regional, international, and local actors are explored, focusing on their use of social and legacy media platforms to execute influence operations targeting the Iraqi public. The first case study examines the Iranian-aligned Iraqi Radio and Television Union and their deployment of disinformation narratives during the 2021 national election. The second case study investigates unofficial Iranian-aligned Telegram media outlets and their promotion of the Russian narrative in the Russia-Ukraine War. The final case study analyses Pro-China and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Facebook influencers in Iraq and their engagement in coordinated inauthentic behavior. By connecting the interactions of these actors, this paper reveals a complex web of disinformation in the Iraqi digital information ecosystem, emphasising the role played by national and international actors in perpetuating it. The findings contribute to a better understanding of disinformation dynamics, enabling more effective strategies to combat disinformation and foster informed and democratic societies.

## Introduction

With the advent of modern technology, the internet, and social media, the world has witnessed significant changes and shifts in human behavior. Social media has become an integral part of everyday life, but like any other tool in history, its utilisation has come with its own set of grievances. This paper provides a general overview of systematic political disinformation in the Iraqi digital information ecosystem. It examines the history of disinformation in Iraq during and after the fall of the Baathist regime, and investigates how national and international actors use disinformation as a political tool in Iraq. We answer this question by drawing on three case studies that investigate the overlapping interests of national and regional political actors: *How do regional, international, and local actors utilise social and legacy media platforms to execute influence operations targeting the public, and to what extent do these actors indirectly reinforce and reinforce each other's narratives in the process?*

First, we look at an Iran-aligned legacy media entity called the Iraqi Radio and Television Union and how they employed disinformation narratives during and after the Iraqi 2021 national election. Second, we examine other unofficial Iran-aligned Telegram media outlets and examples of their promotion of the Russian narrative in the Russia-Ukraine War. Lastly, we analyse Pro-China and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Facebook influencers in Iraq and how they engage in coordinated inauthentic behavior. The paper aims to connect all the interactions which these actors have with each other.

Overall, this paper sheds light on the complex and interconnected web of disinformation in the Iraqi digital information ecosystem, and highlights the role of both national and international actors in perpetuating it. By understanding these dynamics, we can better equip ourselves to combat disinformation and promote a more informed and democratic society.

## I. Disinformation as Political Communication

Public opinion and democratic institutions can be undermined by disinformation. Bennett argues that disinformation is used by radical right movements and parties to mobilise their supporters against centre parties and mainstream media.<sup>1</sup> Andrés defines disinformation as a manipulative practice in political communication and international relations.<sup>2</sup> Freelon discusses the sociopolitical factors that contribute to the flourishing of disinformation and provides an overview of the history of disinformation research.<sup>3</sup> Ireton defines disinformation as false information created with the intention to harm individuals, social groups, organisations, or countries, and highlights its common dissemination through social

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett, W. Lance and Steven G. Livingston. "The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions." *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2018): 122 - 139.

<sup>2</sup> Andrés, Roberto Rodríguez. "Fundamentos del concepto de desinformación como práctica manipuladora en la comunicación política y las relaciones internacionales." *Historia Y Comunicacion Social* 23 (2018): 231-244.

<sup>3</sup> Freelon, Deen and Chris Wells. "Disinformation as Political Communication." *Political Communication* 37 (2020): 145 - 156.

media.<sup>4</sup> These papers suggest that disinformation poses a growing threat to democratic institutions and calls for further research to understand its impact on political communication.

The term disinformation was widely popularised and anglicised during the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> The term comes from a specialised Russian KGB unit called *Dezinformatsiya*, whose purpose was to mislead opponents and shape public perceptions to achieve Russian state political goals.<sup>6</sup>

The Iraqi media is no stranger to disinformation narratives; it has long been a battleground between opposing factions, fueled by the political economy and elite capture of news media. Declining trust in the political system and government has also allowed narratives to spread more quickly across social media, the preferred platform as citizens turn away from partisan legacy media outlets on television, newspapers and radio. In Iraq's conflict-driven political arena, peripheral centres of power compete in a variety of ways in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup>

The use of disinformation as a political tool has advanced with the advent of modern technologies and social media. For example, Iran-aligned media outlets can now generate significant disruptions in the Iraqi information environment. They engage in influence operations to disrupt or distort the reporting of security events, propagate distorted political narratives, and spread outright disinformation. This regional-scale disinformation primarily targets Gulf countries due to the strained relationships between them and Iran. However, it is worth noting that reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is currently underway, as evidenced by the selection of ambassadors to be stationed in both Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> On a local level, these groups often target Gulf countries and their regional rivals. For example, this paper's first case study explores claims of election fraud made by the Secretary General of *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq*. The Secretary General alleged that the UAE, with the awareness of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq, planned to conduct election fraud by rerouting all the votes from Iraqi servers to their own, enabling them to manipulate the results in a way that would lead to the defeat of *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq* and the larger parliamentary bloc.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ireton, Cheryl. "Journalism, 'fake news' and disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training." (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Freelon, Deen, and Chris Wells. "Disinformation as Political Communication." *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 145–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>.

<sup>6</sup> Aristedes Mahairas, and Mikhail Dvilyanski. "Disinformation – Дезинформация (*Dezinformatsiya*)." *The Cyber Defense Review* 3, no. 3 (2018): 21–28

<sup>7</sup> Saleem, Zmkan, and Mac Skelton. "Actors, Conflict, and Competition in Iraq's Disputed Territories After the Islamic State: The Cases of Northern Diyala and Eastern Salahaddin." *Journal for Political and Security Studies* 2, no. 4 (2019): 205–36. <https://doi.org/10.31271/jopss.10030>

<sup>8</sup> Iranian FM Welcomes Designation Of Ambassadors With Saudi Arabia." *Iran International*, 13 May 2023. Accessed 13 May 2023. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202305135534>

<sup>9</sup> For the full case study, see section 2, Case Study 1

Iraq is a fragile state, with a long history beginning with British occupation from 1914 to 1932.<sup>10</sup> The US invasion in 2003<sup>11</sup> failed to stabilise Iraq after years of conflict between Iran and Kuwait, subsequent internal civil and sectarian wars in 2006<sup>12</sup>, the occupation of Mosul and Sunni areas by the Islamic State in 2014,<sup>13</sup> and the intrusion of Iran-aligned militia groups in the security and statebuilding branches of the Iraqi state.<sup>14</sup> From these conflicts, several observations can be made. First, the country's political history has involved a series of coups and counter coups, purges and counter purges, violent seizures of power, ruthless suppression and dissent, wars, and sanctions. The Iraqi people have not had a voice in most of this history because of the absence of democratic institutions and political parties before 2003 and their weak impact on society since that time.<sup>15</sup> Understanding the roots of disinformation and propaganda in Iraq helps the reader to get a sense of the origins of the lived experiences of Iraqi people and how that changes intra- and post-Baathist regimes.

### History of disinformation in Iraq

Many foreign and domestic political groups have tried to control Iraqi media. One of the initial steps taken by the British forces after the end of World War I was to produce several Arabic newspapers throughout Iraq, which was under their mandate.<sup>16</sup> This section gives a quick overview of the history of disinformation and propaganda in Iraq. It examines two time periods. The first is 1990-2003, the last decade of the Baathist regime. The second is post-2003, when Iraqi society opened to the world and new media outlets and platforms were created.

#### *Baathist regime: 1990 - 2003*

Under Saddam Hussein, Iraqis were familiar with disinformation, which was not a new phenomenon. The government used the media as an instrument for propaganda throughout Saddam Hussein's rule, with distortions of the truth and outright lies widespread in the local and regional context.<sup>17</sup> For example, the Baathist party used its media to show only specific attractive attributes of the Baathist party and Iraq. It did not intend to cover the news in the Kurdish Northern part of Iraq.

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<sup>10</sup>Dodge, Toby. "Iraq: The contradictions of exogenous state-building in historical perspective." *Third World Quarterly* 27 (2006): 187 - 200.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid

<sup>12</sup>International Crisis Group. *The Next Iraqi War? : Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*. Baghdad ; Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2006.

<sup>13</sup>Romano, David J.. "Iraq's Descent into Civil War: A Constitutional Explanation." *The Middle East Journal* 68 (2014): 547 - 566.

<sup>14</sup>Paktian, Faisal. "Handling the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces In The Post-Islamic State Iraq." *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 2, no. 2 (2019): 13. <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v2i2.1062>.

<sup>15</sup>Alnasrawi. (1994). *The economy of Iraq : oil, wars, destruction of development and prospects, 1950-2010*. Greenwood Press.

<sup>16</sup>Haddad, Mahmoud. "Ami Ayalon, The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Pp. 314." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 4 (1996): 609–12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800063984>.

<sup>17</sup>Isakhan, Benjamin. "Manufacturing Consent in Iraq: Interference in the Post-Saddam Media Sector." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009): 7–25. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcis.3.1.7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcis.3.1.7_1).

Understanding how the Baathist regime marginalised people's voices is essential because it is the reason for the current complex media dynamics in Iraq. The Baathist regime in Iraq portrayed the Anfal campaign against Kurdish villages as a necessary military operation to combat Kurdish rebellion and separatism.<sup>18</sup> The regime sought to justify its actions by portraying the Kurds as traitors who were collaborating with Iran and threatening Iraq's territorial integrity.

The regime used state-controlled media to spread a narrative that the Anfal campaign<sup>19</sup> was a legitimate response to Kurdish insurgency and terrorism. The Kurds were depicted as a threat to national security, and the regime claimed that the campaign was necessary to restore order and stability in the country.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Post-Baathist regime: 2003–present*

After the US military intervention and the fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, Iraq's media environment transformed almost overnight from the tightly controlled propaganda apparatus of Saddam Hussein into a diverse, unrestricted, and complex media environment. With the removal of the Baathist regime, the media landscape suddenly opened up to the Iraq public, allowing a dramatic increase in the number of newspapers, television, and radio stations.<sup>21</sup>

To illustrate this change, prior to 2003, the Baathist regime had only two main TV outlets, Al-Iraqiya and Iraqi News Agency. Both of these outlets were tightly controlled by the Iraqi Baathist regime.<sup>22</sup> Today, in 2023, Iraq has over 100 privately owned media outlets, radio stations and digital media sites. The new media environment was a drastic change from the highly censored media that had existed for decades under the former regime. Instead of only state-run media outlets, a new range of private media outlets and international media organisations grew to serve Iraq's citizens. The number of television, radio, and newspaper outlets grew exponentially after the fall of Saddam Hussein. This newfound freedom of expression allowed Iraq to become a major media hub in the Middle East, with a variety of voices being heard.<sup>23</sup>

However, with the increasing control of Iraq by Iran-aligned militia groups and their media outlets, the freedom of speech in Iraq soon dwindled, especially during the October 2019 protests where at least 500 Iraqi protesters were killed by the government and Iran-aligned

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<sup>18</sup>The Ba'th Party was critical to maintaining the compliance, complicity, cooperation, and support of a significant segment of Iraq's population until the American-led invasion of 2003. See Matthews, Weldon C. *The Arab Studies Journal* 23, no. 1 (2015): 387–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44744916>.

<sup>19</sup>The Kurdish Anfal Campaign was a series of military operations conducted by the Baathist regime of Iraq against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq during the late 1980s. The campaign killed 50,000 to 182,000 Kurds with many more displaced from their homes. See Human Rights Watch. (1993). *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal campaign against the Kurds*. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/>

<sup>20</sup>Ibid

<sup>21</sup>Zanger, Maggy. "Iraq's Emerging Press." *Nieman Reports*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2005.(106)

<sup>22</sup>Ibid

<sup>23</sup>Ibid

militia groups.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the security situation in Iraq posed a significant threat to journalists, several of whom were targeted and killed for their work.

Iraq's freedom of expression is waning. Iraq fell from 163 to 172 out of 180 countries in the 2022 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index.<sup>25</sup> Despite these challenges, Iraq's media landscape has continued to evolve and become increasingly diverse. Today, Iraq boasts hundreds of television and radio stations, as well as dozens of newspapers and magazines.

**Table 1. Examples of international Arabic-speaking media outlets in Iraq**

Outlet name	International affiliation	Narrative
<a href="#">Al-Hurra Iraq</a>	United States	Pro-US / Liberal
<a href="#">Al-Hadath Iraq</a>	Saudi Arabia	Pro-Gulf countries
<a href="#">RT- Arabic</a>	Russia	Pro-Russia / Pro-Iran
<a href="#">CGTN</a>	China	Pro-China/ Belt and Road Initiative
<a href="#">Al-Alam</a>	Iran	Pro-Iran/IRGC/Khamenei
<a href="#">Anadolu Agency Arabic</a>	Turkey	Pro-Turkey/ Anti-PKK narrative

While Iraq's open borders also created a conducive environment to host international media, each media organisation has promoted their state-based political narrative against those of other states. Iraq's media landscape has become one of the most contested information environments in the region. The United States, Gulf countries, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and other countries have infiltrated the Iraqi information ecosystem. Table 1 shows examples of international political actors with a media footprint in Iraq.

Table 1 above exemplifies only some of the international media outlets that promote their narrative in the Iraqi information ecosystem. Countries like Iran and China rely on other proxy media outlets and influencers on multiple platforms such as Twitter, Telegram and Facebook. This paper's next sections will examine some examples of these proxy media outlets and influencers of Iran and China.

<sup>24</sup>Al Jazeera. "Iraq's protests: All you need to know in 500 words." Al Jazeera, October 4, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/4/iraqs-protests-all-you-need-to-know-in-500-words>.

<sup>25</sup>Reporters Without Borders. "Iraq." Reporters Without Borders, 2021. <https://rsf.org/en/country/iraq>

## The Iranian political narrative in Iraqi Radio and Television Union's legacy media

Iraqi Radio and Television Union is a media organisation that provides funds and infrastructure to resistance (Iran-aligned political parties) outlets in Iraq (see Table 2). This union supports "non-kinetic"<sup>26</sup> information operations and propaganda activities to achieve political goals. The union supports information operations to counter US propaganda, to counter domestic information put out by moderate political and social political parties, and to counter Saudi information operations.<sup>27</sup>

The union is a branch of Iran's Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU).<sup>28</sup> It launched in Najaf on June 22, 2012. On September 17, 2013, the Union held a founding conference in Baghdad. On June 22, 2012, the Union elected Iraqi cleric Muhammad Dhiya al-Beedhawe as the union's head. Hamid al-Husseini, another Iraqi cleric with close ties to the office of the Iranian Supreme Leader, quickly replaced him. Husseini is a colonel in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a connection that developed after he fled Iraq during Saddam Hussein's reign.<sup>29</sup>

Currently, the Union has a mobile application with different television, radio, newspaper outlets, each of which has its unique political affiliation. However, they are all, either directly or indirectly, aligned with Iran. For example, Al-Ahad TV is an Iraqi media outlet that has operated since 2009<sup>30</sup>. The media outlet is owned by a paramilitary group called Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, a group often known for human rights violations. This TV network creates content that targets three main entities. First, from 2019 to 2021, it extensively targeted the Iraqi government because it was more aligned with the US. It often created disinformation against the Iraqi government and its former Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. Secondly, the media outlet constantly produced and amplified disinformation narratives against the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) and other international stakeholders. This was evident after the results of the 2021 Iraqi national election came out. The channel started claiming that the UN had intentionally rigged the election with the support of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, [calling the UN Iraq's special representative Jeannine Plasschaert the godmother of the election fraud](#). Lastly, the channel often amplifies disinformation against its Sunni political rivals. For example, it has extensively targeted the Sunni Speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives, [Mohammad Al-Halbousi, as a subordinate of Turkey and](#)

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<sup>26</sup> Non-kinetic means an entity that does not carry out any military operations but rather covers them.

<sup>27</sup> Malik, Hamdi. "Profile: The Iraqi Radio and Television Union." Washington Institute for Near East Policy. October 22, 2022. <https://doi.org/https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-iraqi-radio-and-television-union>.

<sup>28</sup> Islamic Radio and Television Union is a conglomerate of Farsi, Arabic, English-speaking media outlets that are controlled by Iran's IRGC. Their narratives are often against the US, Israel and Gulf countries. Often known to engage in disinformation, and due to that, their websites are often seized by the US department of justice Source: United States Department of Justice. "United States Seizes Websites Used by Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union and Kata'ib Hizballah." Press Release, June 22, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/united-states-seizes-websites-used-iranian-islamic-radio-and-television-union-and-kata-ib>

<sup>29</sup> Malik, Hamdi. "Profile: The Iraqi Radio and Television Union." Washington Institute for Near East Policy. October 22, 2022. <https://doi.org/https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-iraqi-radio-and-television-union>.

<sup>30</sup> Al-Ahad TV. "Who are we?" Al-Ahad TV. January 1, 2021. <https://doi.org/https://www.alahad.iq/?page=category&catId=214>.

[Gulf countries](#). It has also conspired against Mohammad Al-Halbousi for being a part of a political agenda that aims to normalise relationships with Israel. This is not true, as he has voted in laws that limit Iraq's dealings with the State of Israel<sup>31</sup>.

**Table 2: An example of some of the pro-Iranian channels under the umbrella of the Iraqi Radio and Television Union**

Iraqi Radio and Television Union			
Media Outlet Name	Militia Group	Political Party	Leader
<a href="#">Al-Ahad</a>	<a href="#">Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq</a>	<a href="#">Sadiqun Parliamentary Bloc</a>	<a href="#">Qais Al-Khazali</a>
<a href="#">Aletejah</a>	<a href="#">Kata'ib Hezbollah</a>	None	Unknown
<a href="#">Al-Nujaba</a>	<a href="#">Harakat Al-Nujaba</a>	None	Akram Al-Kaabi
<a href="#">Al-Anwar 2</a>	<a href="#">Kata'ib Sayiid Al-Shuhada</a>	None	<a href="#">Abu Ala'a Al-Wala'i</a>
<a href="#">I-News</a>	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
<a href="#">Al-Ghadeer</a>	<a href="#">Badr Organization</a>	Badr Parliamentary Bloc	<a href="#">Hadi Al-Ameri</a>
<a href="#">Afaq TV</a>	None	<a href="#">State of Law Coalition</a>	<a href="#">Nuri Al-Maliki</a>
<a href="#">Al-Furat</a>	None	Al-Hikma Movement	<a href="#">Ammar Al-Hakim</a>

With many Iran-aligned legacy media channels under its umbrella, the Iraqi Radio and Television Union has become one of Iran's disinformation tools in Iraq, further re-affirming its anti-West and anti-Israel narrative. While supporting Iran, China, and Russia, the case study below explores an example of the dissemination of a disinformation narrative from Al-Ahad media, a member of that Union.

<sup>31</sup> "برلمان العراق يحظر التطبيع مع إسرائيل" Al Jazeera, May 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2022/5/12/برلمان-العراق-يحظر-التطبيع-مع-إسرائيل>.



## II. Case Studies

Each of these case studies explores the different platforms used by international actors to spread their messages on social media. This paper focuses on Iran's influence on the Iraqi information ecosystem through two categories of media outlets aligned with its ideology. The first category consists of legacy media outlets in Iraq, while the second category includes unofficial and unmoderated Telegram channels and Twitter influencers. Although the specific individuals behind these channels are unknown, their content aligns with the narrative of Iran-aligned militia groups and often disseminates disinformation that seeps into social and legacy media outlets. Additionally, this paper examines some of the influencers of the Al-Faw organisation, which promotes China's Belt and Road Initiative in Iraq. It is important to note that these case studies represent only a portion of the systematic disinformation actors in the Iraqi information ecosystem.

### Case Study 1: Claims of election fraud on legacy media

On October 2, 2021, just eight days prior to the Iraqi National Election, the Secretary General of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, Qais Al-Khazali, was interviewed by various media outlets affiliated with the Iraqi Radio and Television Union. It is worth noting that the US Department of State has designated Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq as a terrorist organisation. During the interview, Al-Khazali made allegations regarding the occurrence of systematic fraud through two distinct methods. The first method involves electronic manipulation of the votes, for which regional forces with technological capabilities are purportedly responsible. The second method entails political parties interfering in the democratic process by physically obstructing the voting process at polling stations.<sup>32</sup>

Al-Khazali's claims of systematic fraud subsequently became the basis for disinformation narratives surrounding the election results. This strategy, known as "building grounds for disinformation," was employed by Al-Khazali's media outlet, Al-Ahad, following the loss of a significant number of seats by his political alliance. The disinformation narratives were constructed based on previous claims made prior to the election. The dissemination of disinformation after the announcement of the 2021 Iraqi election results exemplified the dysfunctionality of the democratic process in Iraq. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq refuted the allegations of systematic fraud in the 2021 Iraqi election, describing it as a "free and fair election that was devoid of systematic fraud." However, media outlets affiliated with the losing political parties, including Al-Ahad and other outlets within the Iraqi Radio and Television Union, persisted in conducting disinformation campaigns, further perpetuating the notion of systematic fraud in the Iraqi national elections through their television broadcasts.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Nina News. "قيس الخزعلي: هناك إرادة قوية لتزوير الانتخابات يجب منعها." October 2, 2021. Accessed [insert access date]. URL: <https://ninanews.com/Website/News/Details?Key=930427>

<sup>33</sup>Al-Salhy, Suadad. "Iraq elections 2021: Iran ally Fatah dealt triple blow in pursuit of power." Middle East Eye, October 8, 2021. Accessed May 13, 2023. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-elections-fatah-iran-ally-blow-power>

On November 4, 2021, Al-Ahad media published an interview featuring Qais Al-Khazali, the Secretary General of Asa'ib Ahl-Al-Haq, an organisation officially designated as a terrorist group by the US Department of State. During the interview, Al-Khazali propagated a conspiracy theory implicating Jeanine Plaascheart, the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative, alleging that she had endorsed the United Arab Emirates' endeavor to manipulate Iraqi votes in the elections. Furthermore, he claimed to possess "categorical evidence" substantiating the occurrence of fraud during the elections.<sup>34</sup> In tandem with these narratives, a coordinated hashtag campaign was launched across various pro-Iranian media outlets, perpetuating the notion of electoral malpractice. However, a meticulous inquiry conducted by the United Nations Special Representative demonstrated that there was no substantiated evidence supporting claims of systematic fraud in the 2021 Iraqi national elections.<sup>35</sup>

This and other accompanying statements by the leaders of the pro-Iranian political blocs triggered mass protests in [Baghdad](#), [Mosul](#), [Anbar](#), and [Basra](#). These were extensively reported by Al-Ahad and other pro-Iranian media outlets affiliated with the Iraqi Radio and Television Union.<sup>36</sup>

This case study aims to show how disinformation narratives spread from top-level leaders to lower-level influencers and amplifiers of these narratives, especially in legacy media, and how they can impact the public perception of fair elections, leading to civil unrest and often violence.

## **Case Study 2: Unofficial Iran-aligned Iraqi Telegram media outlets amplify Russian disinformation in Iraq**

The following case study examines a more detailed disinformation system. Unofficial Iranian-aligned Iraqi Telegram channels coordinate and participate in systematic disinformation campaigns that frequently extend to other platforms, including Twitter. Telegram has become a regular viewing practice for many Iraqis. Recent statistics from Hootsuite indicate that Iraqis spent an average of 6 minutes and 30 seconds on Telegram per day in 2021.<sup>37</sup> Telegram is a messaging platform that provides the ability to create public channels where users can subscribe and receive news updates. Its fast, reliable, and user-friendly nature makes it a popular choice for both unofficial and official outlets in Iraq to communicate with their audience and deliver news notifications effectively.<sup>38</sup> In recent years, Telegram has emerged as the primary platform for disseminating disinformation

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<sup>34</sup>Al-Ahad Media. "Message on Telegram." Telegram, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://t.me/alahadch/203385>.

<sup>35</sup>United Nations. "Briefing by SRSG Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert (8,910th meeting, UN Security Council, 23 Nov 2021)." UN Web TV. November 23, 2021, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1k/k1kh1gce9n>.

<sup>36</sup>Al-Ahad Media. "#تظاهرات حاشدة في تلعفر احتجاجا على تزوير الانتخابات#" Telegram, November 18, 2021, <https://t.me/alahadch/201799>.

<sup>37</sup>Datareportal. "Iraq: Digital 2021." Datareportal. January 1, 2022. <https://doi.org/https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-iraq>.

<sup>38</sup>Telegram. "What is Telegram?" Telegram. January 1, 2022. <https://doi.org/https://telegram.org/faq#q-what-is-telegram-what-do-i-do-here>

narratives on various topics in Iraq. It is predominantly utilised by Iran-aligned political and paramilitary groups to spread such narratives.

For example, on January 18, 2021, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for bombing a power grid in Jurf Al-Sakhar, a strategically important location 50 kilometres south of Baghdad. The Islamic State frequently targets power grids as part of its operations. On June 6, they announced the start of a 35-day operation targeting electricity lines, in which they destroyed more than 15 towers per week, and issued a threat of further attacks in the future.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, the pro-Iranian digital army initiated a hashtag campaign alleging that the United States was responsible for bombing the Iraqi Army, resulting in the deaths of six individuals. The campaign gained significant traction and eventually became the top trending hashtag on Twitter.<sup>40</sup>

The influence operation undertaken in this case pursued multiple objectives with the intention of undermining various entities. Firstly, its aim was to discredit the government led by former Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi by asserting that Iraq lacked sovereignty due to Al-Kadhimi's alliance with the United States. Secondly, the narrative shifted to implicate the US and international coalition forces in alleged bombings of Iraqi Army positions in Jurf Al-Sakhar, despite the fact that these positions were predominantly controlled by Iran-aligned militia groups. Subsequently, the narrative further shifted to target Israeli fighter jets, falsely claiming their responsibility for the bombings instead of the US coalition jets.

Following these events, Telegram outlets affiliated with Daesh (ISIS) reported a series of explosions. The Iraqi Security Media Cell (SMC) subsequently announced the discovery of explosives planted by Daesh fighters on power grids in the vicinity of the aforementioned area.<sup>41</sup>

With the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Telegram outlets aligned with Iran in Iraq began amplifying anti-Ukraine narratives and expressing support for Russian aggression against Ukraine. This can be attributed to the fact that any narrative that undermines the West and its allies is perceived as beneficial to Iran and its allies. Given Iran's opposition to NATO and the United States, these Iran-aligned Telegram outlets unofficially provide support in the form of disseminating such narratives.

One prominent Telegram outlet that has gained infamy for disseminating disinformation within the Iraqi information ecosystem is Sabereen News. This Iraqi Telegram channel has amassed an impressive following of over 309,000 subscribers. As described by Malik, Sabereen News is considered a "media facade" initially associated with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), but it has evolved into a platform supporting resistance activities, potentially having

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<sup>39</sup> Layal Shakir, "ISIS claims attacks on 68 electricity towers in Iraq," Rudaw, last modified July 9, 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/09072021>.

<sup>40</sup> Telegram Channel: SabreenS1. "U.S. Drone Carried out Operation on Iraqi Army Positions." Telegram, January 18, 2021. Accessed June 15, 2023. URL: <https://t.me/sabreenS1/17676>.

<sup>41</sup> Baghdad Today News. "صور أولية من موقع تفجير جرف الصخر الذي استهدف أبراجا للطاقة." January 19, 2021. Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://baghdadtoday.news/143127-.html>.

direct ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Sabereen News functions as a social media propaganda channel, primarily focusing on information operations rather than direct military actions. Its aim is to provide nonviolent support to various armed Iran-aligned militia groups, including kinetic military, kinetic paramilitary, and social operations, with the ultimate goal of weakening both domestic and foreign adversaries.<sup>42</sup>

Telegram has become a preferred platform for many Iran-aligned militia groups in Iraq to efficiently and rapidly disseminate their narratives. These groups, as listed in Table 2, have established a strong presence on Telegram as part of their strategic media footprint. Furthermore, these militias have played a role in the emergence of unaffiliated pro-Iran Telegram channels, which often amplify misleading or false narratives.

In the photo to the left, Sabereen News portrays Russia's positive image, describing it as the [“great” Russian Federation Army seizing Turkish Drones in Ukraine](#). This is one of the many examples in which Sabereen News promotes the Russian Army. Another example is Sabereen news. It [created a poll asking "Do you think that Russia will officially declare war on Nazi Ukraine on May 9, the anniversary of the great victory over Nazism...!?"](#) In addition, Sabereen News and other Iran-aligned telegram outlets have called Ukrainian forces NATO militias. They have also often used [derogatory names for NATO, such as the “Gay NATO,” since homosexuality has a bad connotation in Iraq](#).



Iran-aligned media outlets not only support the Russian aggression against Ukraine on Telegram but also amplify similar Russian narratives against Ukraine and the west via their legacy media and Iraqi Radio and Television Union media outlets. While the reason for doing so may not be a direct support for the Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is an act of being against the US and its western allies because that is in line with Iran's narrative.

<sup>42</sup> Malik, Hamdi, Smith, Crispin , and Michael Knights. "Profile: Sabereen News." Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Washington Institute, April 9, 2021. <https://doi.org/https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-sabereen-news#main-content>.

### Case Study 3: China's Belt and Road Initiative and social media influencers in Iraq

Since the 2003 US-led invasion, China's influence in Iraq has been steadily increasing. China has now become Iraq's top trading partner and has made significant investments in Iraq's oil sector. In addition to this, China is also involved in the reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure, including the construction of roads and bridges. China has provided humanitarian aid and support to Iraq, such as emergency relief supplies, medical assistance, and assistance with the repatriation of Iraqi refugees.

Much research suggests that China's influence on Iraq is primarily related to its quest for oil. Jaffe argues that China's shift to net oil importer status in 1993 has made it vulnerable to global oil market events, and that China's interests in securing oil supplies may conflict with those of the West.<sup>43</sup> Lai notes that China has taken steps to satisfy its growing domestic demand for oil, including expanding overseas oil supplies from the Middle East, diversifying its importing sources, and securing oil transport routes.<sup>44</sup> Shichor observes that China has established full diplomatic relations with all Middle Eastern governments and has become one of the strongest economies in the world, which has increased its influence in the region.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Yang examines China's decision-making in the UN Security Council regarding Iraq, and finds that China's strategic preferences and conflicting understandings have influenced its position on issues such as the use of force, state sovereignty, and weapons inspections. Overall, the papers suggest that China's influence on Iraq is primarily related to its energy needs and its growing economic and diplomatic power.<sup>46</sup>

China has also become increasingly involved in Iraq's political process, providing political support to various Iraqi political factions, including Shia parties, Sunnis, Kurds, and the Iraqi government. China's involvement in Iraq's communication infrastructure is also noteworthy as it provided the infrastructure for 4G communications in Iraq. Huawei, a China-based company, provides communications infrastructure to multiple national companies such as Zain, FastLink, and Newroz.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an economic and diplomatic project launched by China with the aim of establishing a new Silk Road for trade and commerce between China and countries across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The BRI encompasses various infrastructure projects, including railways, roads, ports, and pipelines, along with investments in energy, industry, and finance. Iraq plays a crucial role in China's BRI plan, as China heavily invests in Iraq's infrastructure and industry. Through a memorandum of understanding signed with Iraq's former Prime Minister Adil Abd Al-Mahdi, Iraq's oil will be exchanged for infrastructure projects funded by China. In August 2019, China's state-owned energy company, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), entered a \$53 billion agreement with Iraq's state-owned South Oil Company to develop Iraq's vast West

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<sup>43</sup> Jaffe, Amy Myers and Steven W Lewis. "Beijing's oil diplomacy." *Survival* 44 (2002): 115 - 134.

<sup>44</sup> Lai, Hongyi. "China's oil diplomacy: is it a global security threat?" *Third World Quarterly* 28 (2007): 519 - 537.

<sup>45</sup> Shichor, Yitzhak. "China's Upsurge: Implications for the Middle East." *Israel Affairs* 12 (2006): 665 - 683.

<sup>46</sup> Yang, Suzanne Xiao. "China in UN Security Council Decision-Making on Iraq: Conflicting Understandings, Competing Preferences." (2012).

Qurna oil field. This deal, a part of China's BRI, is expected to make significant contributions to Iraq's economic development.<sup>47</sup>

Hussein Askary, an Iraqi national and vice-chairman at the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden, actively promotes China's state media content on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He possesses an unusually high number of shares on his platforms. Another influential figure is Karim Badr, who frequently engages with his audience through video content on his [Facebook](#) and [YouTube channels](#), as well [as interviews with TV outlets within the Iraqi Radio and Television Union](#). Karim Badr's social media platforms have gained significant popularity, with approximately 170K followers. Notably, his video posts consistently receive a remarkably high number of shares when compared to other BRI influencers, suggesting a similar pattern of share-to-follower ratio. Another instance worth mentioning is Karim Al-Badr's tendency to promote conspiracy theories without substantiating evidence. For instance, he made an unsupported claim that the [UAE and Israel are conspiring against Iraq](#), aiming to hinder the completion of a major port project which is a part of the BRI initiative. Furthermore, Karim Badr has been involved in hate speech targeting Kurds. In an [interview](#) with Al-Ahad Channel, he expressed the opinion that "Kurds should be excluded from participating in the drafting of the new Iraqi constitution."

In addition to their personal platforms, Karim Badr and other Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) influencers receive promotion on three distinct media platforms. The first platform consists of Arabic-speaking China State-Sponsored Platforms like [CGTN](#), where they actively promote the BRI. The second platform comprises the legacy media outlets of the [Iraqi Radio and Television Union](#), which are aligned with Iran's IRGC. [Lastly, these BRI influencers also post on unofficial Iran-Aligned Telegram outlets](#). The network of connections among these media outlets, which support Iran as Iraq's primary ally and China and Russia as new allies, suggests that while the media coverage may not be coordinated, they all serve a broader and interconnected political purpose.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The three case studies examined above illustrate how interconnected the disinformation and propaganda machinery of Iran, Russia, and China is in Iraq. While these connections may not be intentional, they have naturally formed a self-affirming network. The Iraqi Radio and Television Union, Iran-Aligned Telegram channels, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) influencers have become intertwined within an overlapping information environment in Iraq. They collectively serve one main strategic objective: to demonstrate that China, Russia, and Iran are superior allies compared to the United States.

With the formation of the new Iraqi government and the election of the new Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' Al-Soudani by Iran-aligned political groups, there is a high likelihood that Prime Minister Shia' will foster positive and robust relationships with China,

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<sup>47</sup> Watkins, Simon. "China Tightens Its Grip On Iraq With Three Major Oil Deals." Huawei. January 31, 2022. <https://doi.org/https://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/International/China-Tightens-Its-Grip-On-Iraq-With-Three-Major-Oil-Deals.html>.

Iran, and Russia, while potentially distancing himself from the US and its allies. Given Iraq's strategic location, history, and cultural significance, particularly with its trade routes and substantial oil reserves, it is imperative for the US and its allies to forge stronger strategic relationships with Iraq. Constructive communication with China, Russia, and Iran regarding the development of a resilient infrastructure in Iraq is crucial to ensure its sustainable growth. Assisting Iraq in establishing such infrastructure would be beneficial for all stakeholders in the Middle East and Europe, particularly given the ongoing global energy crisis. Iraq has the potential to play a prominent role in alleviating the strain caused by this energy crisis.

## Recommendations

- **Enhance media literacy programs:** Implement comprehensive media literacy programs to educate the public about the tactics and techniques used in disinformation campaigns. This will help individuals critically evaluate information and distinguish between reliable and misleading sources.
- **Strengthen regulatory frameworks:** Develop and enforce regulations to ensure transparency and accountability in the media landscape. This includes monitoring and addressing the dissemination of false information by both domestic and international media outlets.
- **Promote independent journalism:** Support independent journalism initiatives and provide resources for investigative reporting to counter disinformation narratives. Encouraging diverse voices and fostering an environment conducive to investigative journalism can contribute to a more informed society.
- **International cooperation:** Foster international cooperation between governments, media organisations, and civil society groups to share best practices, exchange information, and collaborate on combating disinformation. Joint efforts can help identify and address cross-border disinformation campaigns effectively.
- **Social media platform responsibility:** Hold social media platforms accountable for addressing disinformation on their platforms. Encourage platforms to implement stronger content moderation policies, fact-checking mechanisms, and transparent algorithms to prevent the spread of false information.
- **Support civil society initiatives:** Provide resources and support to civil society organisations and grassroots initiatives that focus on countering disinformation. These organisations can play a vital role in fact-checking, promoting media literacy, and raising awareness about the dangers of disinformation.
- **Strengthen cybersecurity measures:** Enhance cybersecurity measures to protect critical infrastructure, government institutions, and media organisations from hacking attempts and cyberattacks that aim to spread disinformation. This includes improving network security, training cybersecurity professionals, and promoting awareness about cyber threats.
- **Encourage responsible reporting:** Promote ethical reporting practices among media organisations by encouraging responsible journalism, fact-checking, and adherence to journalistic standards. Media outlets should prioritise accuracy, impartiality, and transparency in their reporting to counter the spread of disinformation.

- **Foster transparency in media ownership:** Enhance transparency in media ownership and financing to identify potential conflicts of interest and undue influence on media outlets. This can help expose hidden agendas and reduce the impact of disinformation campaigns driven by political or economic motives.
- **Public awareness campaigns:** Launch public awareness campaigns to educate the general population about the risks and consequences of consuming and spreading disinformation. These campaigns should emphasise the importance of critical thinking, fact-checking, and responsible sharing of information.



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