

THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

Review Meeting

Media: Reporting Human Rights Issues

Geneva, 27-28 November 2000

**THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC SANCTIONS ON IRAQ
AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE IN THE ARAB AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA**

Nabil Khatib

© 2000, International Council on Human Rights Policy
ICHRP commissioned this document as a Working Paper.
ICHRP has not edited it and is not responsible for its accuracy or for the views and opinions expressed.
ICHRP welcomes the re-use, re-publication and re-distribution of this paper, appropriately cited.

THE ECONOMIC SANCTIONS ON IRAQ – WHEN AND WHY?

1. On August 2, 1990, Iraq occupied the Emirate of Kuwait. Soon after that, on August 6, the United Nations imposed a series of sanctions on Iraq in order to force that country out of Kuwait. In January 1991, an international coalition, headed by the United States, launched the “Desert Storm” operation, an air and naval attack, followed by a land attack in order to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait by force. The operation ended in liberating Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation. The UN Security Council issued additional resolutions in the field of economic sanctions, accompanied by the formation of inspection teams with the task of ensuring that Iraq does not and can no longer produce weapons of mass destruction.
2. The sanctions have been imposed on Iraq since 1990. Since then, around one million Iraqis died, and independent estimates point out that these deaths were the direct result of the economic sanctions. The Iraqi Gross Domestic Product, which reached \$60 billion before the Gulf War went down to \$5.7 billion after nine years of economic sanctions. The income per capita decreased from \$335 in 1988 to \$24 in 1999. Prices of goods in markets were estimated as having increased by eight hundred and fifty times in 1995 compared with the rise in 1990.¹
3. In May 1996, Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 986, which set up what is known as the “Oil-for-Food” programme. This agreement was regarded as a temporary measure to secure the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people. The first shipment of oil was exported, according to the understanding, in December 1996, though the first food items arrived in Iraq in March 1997. Still, though Iraq wanted to export oil, it could not provide the world market with its share because of the destruction incurred on the infrastructure of oil production and pipelines, either because of lack of maintenance or lack of spare parts or because those installations were

¹ United Nations Report on Current Humanitarian Situation in Iraq, March 1999.

bombarded by the continuous air raids of the United States, the United Kingdom, and, for a period, France.

4. Along this line, the UN Secretary General said in his report in February 1999 that the humanitarian aid allocated to Iraq worth \$500 million had not been received in full by Iraq because of the inadequate revenues of oil that Iraq exports in the context of the “Oil-for-Food” programme.
5. UNICEF figures estimate that five to six thousand Iraqi children die every month as a direct result of the economic sanctions. The mortality rate among children under five years of age has risen from forty-eight per one thousand in 1990 to one hundred and twenty-two per one thousand in 1997.² In addition, every fourth child suffers malnutrition, which means an increase of seventy-three per cent compared with the 1991 ratio.

The media in Iraq and in the Arab region

6. Though Iraq was one of the leading Arab countries in the field of media, as it was the first state to use radio and television as a means of mass media in the Middle East and North Africa, the development of the media process remained subordinate and connected, as predicted, to the socio-political structure of the state. Starting in 1991, a region-wide phenomenon of pan-Arab satellite stations has emerged and spread. Yet Iraq was the last Arab country to launch a satellite television channel (owned and run by the government) followed by Djibouti but preceded by all other Arab states including the emerging state of Palestine.
7. The Arab satellite television channels phenomenon represents an important new trend that attracted the attention of many circles and people outside the Arab area, primarily in terms of their differences and standards as compared with state owned media that had prevailed in these countries since they achieved their national independence. It is worth noting that the Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar) for the most fund these satellite stations and that they became operational in the aftermath the Gulf War. Launched on September 17, 1991, the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) was the first Arab satellite television station.
8. The following comments shed some light on the nature of ownership, subordination, government or private classification in the political approach, and the performance of these stations:
 - the media in the Arab world are usually governmental; however, the private sector is increasingly investing in this field either alone or in partnership with governments;
 - the Gulf capital owns most of the stations; being the strongest in the Arab world in terms of investment and commercial power;
 - the majority of the experts, especially in the field of news, and the employees in the newsrooms in Arab satellite channels are Lebanese, Egyptians, Iraqis, Palestinians, and experts from North African countries (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia). The staff come from countries which are known for exporting their expertise, such as Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, or countries that are witnessing involuntary immigration, such as Palestinians, Algerians, and Iraqis;

² UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 1999.

- in contradistinction to the four pan-Arab satellite stations which are leading in the field of entertainment and news – Orbit, ANN, MBC, ART, all based in Europe – *Al Jazeera* is in Qatar. The real capital of the above-mentioned four stations is Saudi Arabia (private with extensions from the economic-political influence in the Royal Family). *Al Jazeera*, for its part is funded by the Qatari government, while ANN is a newly established station with private Saudi-Syrian funds;
 - all Arab countries have satellite stations which are copies, in most cases, of the ground stations; these countries believe that their stations basically target the expatriates of their countries more than they disseminate the local culture and political positions to the world.
9. This reflects a serious change in the context of the following dimensions: ownership of the media transmission (private and governmental); level of technical performance in these countries; and content in terms of openness to the various topics (a higher margin in disseminating information and presenting opinions). But the whole matter can be followed up in terms of the human rights content.
 10. One of the news editors in a newsroom at one of the Arab satellite stations interviewed for this report (who preferred to remain anonymous for job security reasons) said that he and his staff have total freedom to write about human rights issues but only if they pertain to violations committed by Israel and the Palestinian authorities. This is the margin allowed. In the same way, matters pertaining to administrative and governmental corruption in the Arab world are not allowed unless such corruption deals with the Palestinian regions and the performance of the self-rule government there. (We are talking here of course about Arab satellite stations that have no close ties with Arab governments, or at least that do not conform to tight censorship, and which are basically stationed in Europe or Qatar.)
 11. As for the local stations or those run, funded, and censored by the government, they have a tacit understanding under which they refrain from raising any sensitive issue against any other Arab state, unless there is some kind of political conflict between the two states at a certain period of time. This really means that there is no change in the media policy of the official satellite stations.
 12. But as far as the new satellite stations are concerned, in particular ANN, *Al Jazeera*, MBC, and Abu Dhabi (Orbit and ART focus mainly on cultural and entertainment issues and do not deal a lot with news), there is no doubt that these stations present a new image of the Arab media, that raises a lot of debate among the political and cultural circles, in terms of addressing human rights issues – particularly those pertaining to the Iraqi situation and to the Arab-Israeli conflict. *Al Jazeera* is more distinguished in tackling issues that cause unprecedented serious debates all over the Arab world. Such issues were never dealt with or raised in the media that is controlled by the conservative political regimes.
 13. In general, these stations seek to deal with the problems affecting the Arab world, including human rights issues, with openness. They present news with more balanced perspectives, and provide a forum for alternative opinions. The core difference with national channels is that the viewer does not have to pass through the “guard of the gate” or the “selective filter” of the censorship officer who is in essence delegated by the government.

HOW ARE THE ISSUES COVERED LOCALLY?

14. The issue of economic sanctions on Iraq, in terms of its human rights dimension, is covered on Arab stations in the context of the following situations: (i) when discussing the nature of the

sanctions or the 'Oil-for-Food' programme in the United Nations; (ii) when the Iraqi government takes actions or reactions in response to the UN position; and (iii) within the context of violations of the embargo, particularly flights which aim to offer humanitarian assistance (for instance when a plane lands in Iraqi airports or when Iraq sends a plane full of worshippers to Mecca in Saudi Arabia).

15. Some of the news reports constitute an additional approach through initiatives by some reporters to cover the humanitarian aspect of the Iraqi refugees. Moreover, integrated media campaigns in some mass media publicly announce an editorial line supportive of Iraq as a political cause and as a human rights cause.
16. Coverage is done through both news bulletins and talk shows. MBC and *Al Jazeera* have never raised the legal dimension through following a specific case that might express a human rights violation resulting from the economic sanctions on Iraq. For instance, on August 13, 1999, MBC presented through its correspondent in the Jordanian capital, Amman, Sa'd Silawi, a series of two reports and a third analytical report about the so-called "*problem of Iraqi refugees in Jordan.*" These reports tackled the issue of the "*Iraqi problem*" but from the angle of the humanitarian burdens of the dispersed Iraqis in Jordan, who look for jobs or who run away from political oppression in their country. The report also examined the problem of Iraqi refugees in Jordan and its impact on the political and socio-economic regime in Jordan itself. The speakers in the report were refugees who talked about their sufferings. There were also speakers on behalf of the Jordanian government, who talked about the leading role of Jordan which suffers from bearing the ramifications of political crises in the region and the flight of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees to Jordan.
17. One day prior to that report, UNICEF had issued a report with new data pointing to the mortality rates among children in Iraq as having doubled since the Gulf War. The report also talked about a death rate of one hundred and forty-five per one thousand children in the central regions that were completely controlled by the Iraqi government. What was noticeable in the MBC report was that the station avoided quoting excerpts from the UNICEF report as an approach to cover the problem (with all its various dimensions from within Iraq and through a correspondent in Baghdad). The alternative was to raise issues with humanitarian dimensions but not reflect the core of the problem.
18. Shortly thereafter, a talk show program entitled "Agenda" devoted one show to tackling the ramifications of the embargo. That program featured a political discussion with representatives from the Iraqi regime (the guest from Washington was the Iraqi delegate to the United Nations) and a representative from the Iraqi opposition which is stationed in London. Though the program presented some of the data from UNICEF, the debate related to the information from a political rather than a human rights perspective. The core of the discussion was whether the Iraqi regime bears the responsibility of the continuation of the economic sanctions and its results in terms of the human rights violations or whether the international community is taking a very stringent position against Iraq. Regardless of the details, MBC avoided tackling the issue from a human rights point of view.
19. Around the same period, the same topic – the UNICEF findings – was granted two hours in the *Al Itijah al Mon'akiss* (the opposite direction) weekly programme on *Al Jazeera*. The positions reflected in that programme tended to shed light on the suffering, but also debating it from a political angle and not on a human rights basis. The conclusion was that the Western countries, through the UN, are taking harsh and stringent measures against the Iraqi people who must not be blamed for the political regime in Baghdad. The debate attempted to answer the following question: "*What is the motive behind the international policy towards Iraq?*" The legal-humanitarian dimensions were not used in that explanation.

20. During the past year, the Iraqi humanitarian issue was covered on MBC and *Al Jazeera* stations in not more than nine instances. Coverage was almost systematically through staff in the newsroom at the stations (respectively in London and in Doha, Qatar) not through correspondents in Baghdad.³
21. News editors at the MBC station (again names of editors interviewed for this paper are withheld) say that the issues covered and the nature of the coverage are not left to their professional discretion, but to an unwritten understanding regarding unannounced red lines. One of them remarks that *“the owner of the station is a Saudi who has close family ties to the Royal Family. Therefore, the editor makes every effort not to cover any issue that might give the impression that the station is covering the economic sanctions on Iraq. He does it in a way to show that the legal-humanitarian duty stipulates giving priority to the rights of the Iraqi people rather than besieging the ruling regime in order to keep it weak, which coincides with the Saudi security interests.”* The editors whom we talked with repeated that the trend in covering and choosing the news does not come from direct censorship but according to their personal predictions and readings of the required approach. On the other hand, they were never asked to give the matter much importance *“inasmuch as it shows that sufferings of the Iraqi people are a result of the policies of the ruling regime in Iraq.”*
22. As for *Al Jazeera*, the political position of the Prince of Qatar who funds the station stems from an attempt to improve the relations with Baghdad and in return, he stays away politically from the general line of the Gulf Co-operation Council countries. Thus, the editors work on similar guidelines used by their colleagues in MBC but with a different content in relation to the political interests of the authorities in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and those of the rule in Doha, Qatar.
23. One of the senior editors at *Al Jazeera* explained to me that deciding on the piece of news and the manner to cover the news is not closely co-ordinated with the higher administrative level. In other words there is no direct censorship, but the editor has to read the general policy and uses his judgement in covering the issues of the economic sanctions (referred to on *Al Jazeera* as *“siege”* because the political level tends to prefer to use this term in the context of the political contest with its political adversaries in the rest of the Gulf Co-operation Council countries).
24. By the end of 1999, *Watan*, a Palestinian local television station owned by the private sector with transmission reaching seventy per cent of the areas under Palestinian control, launched a campaign of collecting donations for Iraq. The station called for the campaign on the programmes it aired and continued the process in schools and public institutions towards collecting one million pencils for Iraq, following the announcement of a ban on importing this kind of pencils for fear that they might be used in military manufacturing through using the material making up the pencils. This donation campaign was accompanied by seminars raising what was called the *“oppression”* of the Iraqi people. The director of the station, Omar Nazzal, told us that the campaign was aimed essentially at (i) fostering solidarity with the Iraqi people, (ii) exposing the anti-Arab intentions of the United States, and (iii) helping materially the Iraqi people. Later, Mr. Nazzal travelled to Jordan to ship the pencils to Iraq through Jordan.
25. Thus, the media coverage of the economic sanctions against Iraq, as exemplified by MBC, *Al Jazeera*, and *Watan*, was characterised by the following: (i) it was influenced by the political interests or trends of the parties controlling the above-mentioned stations more than professional considerations such as balance and objectivity, (ii) the coverage was captive of the

³ The issue was tangentially covered on the following dates: on October 13, 2000, regarding the Russian plane arriving in Baghdad; on October 5, regarding the United Arab Emirates plane landing in Baghdad; on March 31, regarding the Iraqi reaction to the UN Security Council resolution to increase oil-extracting equipment allowed to be purchased; on March 2, when Iraq refused the proposals of the UN to allow its worshippers to travel to Mecca and cover their travel expenses; and on March 1, when Iraq sent a plane of worshippers to Baghdad.

political rhetoric rather than the legal aspects, and (iii) the problem of not covering certain issues transcended the style of tackling the issues that were covered.

HOW THE ISSUES ARE COVERED INTERNATIONALLY

26. Here, it is important to note that because of language considerations, the impact of the international mass media – especially the audio and visual – decreases in the Arab case because the English Language is the second or the third Language in most of the Arab countries.
27. The importance of the international coverage – as exemplified by Cable News Network (CNN), *The New York Times*, and world news agencies such as Reuters and Associated Press – resides primarily in its impact on the international public opinion (particularly the Western world), and how that opinion comes to understand the current Iraqi situation. A secondary influence is the impact of this on the local mass media.
28. On October 7, 1998, CNN quoted the former head of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), Richard Butler, as saying “*it may never be possible to prove Iraq was free of prohibited weapons under existing rules.*” In essence, Mr. Butler was blaming Iraq. But this refers to the difficulty in investigating the request outlined by the Security Council on securing that Iraq cannot produce weapons of mass destruction so that it can end the economic sanctions imposed on the country since 1990. There is no doubt that the issue raised (the sanctions) is a political issue that overlaps with the international law but it does not necessarily stem from considerations pertaining to human rights standards, laws, and pertaining conventions.
29. When monitoring and attempting to analyse report samples from an internationally-influential news outlet such as CNN, during the period 1997-2000, one can easily formulate an impression that the focus has always been on the political aspects of this issue, with the almost complete absence of the legal human rights dimensions.
30. Out of nine television reports (aired on CNN⁴ and posted on CNN.com on the Internet), it was found out that only two (October 13 and 5, 2000) reports tackled the actual impact of the sanctions on human beings from a humanitarian or purely human rights aspect.⁵
31. Looking closely at three reports – on the pilgrimage, the UNICEF report, and a story about the deterioration in the economic and health conditions in Iraq – one can note that they are dealing with issues that constitute news reports with a human rights aspect at their core, because pilgrimage to Mecca is a human rights issue as is the rise in mortality and malnutrition rates and malnutrition rates. However, the only report that dealt in detail with the humanitarian problem

⁴ The Atlanta-based Cable News Network (CNN) airs in six editions: CNN (in the continental United States), CNNI (international), CNN Headlines News, CNN Airport Network, CNNfn (financial news), and CNNSI (sports in association with Sports Illustrated).

⁵ Other reports, for instance, were about the problem of the Pilgrimage to Mecca by Iraqis because this constitutes a violation since flights are made without permission and because of the disagreement over the means to secure the funding for the travelling of 24,700 Iraqi pilgrims who cost close to \$50 million in March 2000; two stories about the “Oil-for-Food” programme when there was a dispute that there was a need to repair the spare parts of oil-extracting stations; stories about calls in the United States for easing the US position regarding the sanctions (March 31, 1997) and facilitating the decisions by allowing Iraq to purchase spare parts (December 4, 1997); a report on an incident where a thirty-eight-year old Iraqi demanding the end of the sanctions imposed on his country abducted FAO consultants in Baghdad and killed two of them (January 28, 2000); the above-mentioned UNICEF report pointing to the increase in rate of malnutrition and rise in mortality rates among children in Iraq (August 13, 1999); and a report reviewing the decade of economic sanctions imposed by the UN on Iraq and how the sanctions transformed the country from an effective nation into an area of severe poverty, according to UN officials (July 12, 2000).

was the report that was issued on July 12, 2000, by Rula Amin and Richard Roth from Baghdad. It is worth quoting the story's transcript:

“Sanctions send Iraq on downward spiral”

Video: CNN's Rula Amin looks at the devastating conditions in Iraq
(Warning: Images may be disturbing for some.) July 12, 1999

In this story: Mother of dying son pleads with doctors; UN defends the sanctions

From Correspondent Richard Roth and Reporter Rula Amin

32. Years of UN-imposed economic sanctions have turned Iraq from a nation of relative affluence into one of massive poverty, according to United Nations officials. And, they add, Iraq's infant mortality is now the highest in the world. “*Sanctions are a legitimate tool on the UN charter, but sanctions can kill,*” said Dr. Astrid Heiberg, President of the International Red Cross. “*They are a blunt instrument that damages the poor, the destitute and the vulnerable.*” Contaminated water, deteriorating sewage treatment plants and a severe decline in health care services have helped spread disease and malnutrition among Iraq's children, according to UNICEF. A UN study determined that one of every four Iraqi children is chronically malnourished. “*If you have a constant situation of increased illness but also no food, the child goes into a downward spiral of increased malnutrition,*” said Anupama Rao Sing of UNICEF.
33. Many Iraqis have experienced that downward spiral. Nawal Radi watched it with her two-year-old son Ameer, who had been hospitalised for a month. On the day he died, Ameer weighed six kilograms (thirteen pounds), half the normal weight of children his age. On that day, his mother declined to receive his share of lunch, saying he would take only milk. But the Saddam Paediatrics Hospital had none. Nawal Radi then took Ameer's tiny body to her chest, cradling him as he looked up to her with large eyes. But Ameer's condition had weakened his immunity and led to chest infections. Needed antibiotics were not available. His mother screamed and pleaded with doctors when Ameer seemed to have died. Ameer's grandmother then told her daughter he was dead. The mother was not consoled, saying she could have saved him if the doctors would return Ameer to her. Doctors tried to save the boy, massaging his tiny chest. After ten minutes they gave up and declared the lifeless boy dead.
34. In New York, the fifteen-member UN Security Council has decided forty times in the past nine years to keep the economic sanctions on Iraq. “*The sanctions are there because of the non-compliance on the disarmament requirements of the resolutions dating back to 1991,*” said Peter Burleigh, the acting U.S. ambassador to the UN, defending the action. “*And the U.S. position is that the sanctions will stay on until there is compliance.*” Under the terms that ended the Gulf War, Iraq agreed to disclose and dismantle weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical and biological agents. But Iraq blocked UN weapons inspectors or refused to turn over documents, making council members suspect Baghdad is hiding military secrets. “*Iraq has used these weapons in the past against its own people and has invaded Kuwait,*” said Sir Jeremy Greenstock, British Ambassador to the UN, “*It's still a dangerous country, so these sanctions have a serious purpose,*” he said. Iraq insists there are no secrets and that sanctions are used as a weapon of war. “*Sanctions originally should not be imposed in this comprehensive way which kills children so they should lift it immediately,*” said Saeed Hasan, Iraqi Ambassador to the UN. The sanctions do not bar food and medicine, but Baghdad says they prevent Iraq from buying humanitarian aid by preventing the government from raising revenue, especially from its once lucrative oil trade.
35. In December 1996, the Security Council adopted the so-called ‘oil-for-food’ program that allows Iraq to sell \$5.25 billion worth of oil, with a percentage of revenue going to the Iraqi public for assistance. “*Where Iraq is responsible for distribution, there is still some \$200-300 million worth of medicine sitting in warehouses not being moved and yet they have renewed their army vehicles and their military transport,*”

said Greenstock. Inside the UN Security Council, Iraq is gaining support for sanctions relief. “*We believe that we should lift the sanctions against Iraq because the sanctions against Iraq have been there for eight years and people are suffering.*” said Shen Guofeng, the Deputy Chinese Ambassador to the UN. Even the British, with U.S. support, now favour suspending the sanctions as long as Iraq co-operates on disarmament. But Baghdad says it will never agree to any plan requiring a link between weapons and food.

36. This news story epitomises the complex and constant overlapping of political issues and human rights aspects in the international media coverage of the case of the sanctions on Iraq.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL COVERAGE ON LOCAL COVERAGE?

37. Firstly, it sets the agenda. The international coverage triggers reactions and, in many cases, negative reactions. ‘Southern’ countries come to view the position of the international public opinion in the ‘northern’ nations as being hostile, or at least, indifferent to them. The activity of the Palestinian *Watan* television is a case in point. Secondly, it determines the issues raised at the local and regional levels. Needless to say that the regional and local mass media depend in many cases on the international news agencies (Agence France Presse, Reuters, and Associated Press) as a source of information, in addition to powerful corporations such as CNN. The local media fails in becoming a complete source of information, mainly because of financial and professional expertise considerations as well as the lack of political and media freedom in the local and regional media in the Arab world.
38. Thus, the majority of the Arab mass media depend on the Western or international media in defining their priorities in covering the events in the region although the events take place in the regions where these stations are specialised or located.
39. The local media also falls into a ‘reactive’ mode. Because the Arab mass media (local, regional and pan-Arab) depend on Western or international mass media, the position or the information flows in one direction. Therefore, the role of the socio-political institutions or the public becomes one of a receptor. The action flows in one direction while the reaction flows in the opposite direction.

WHICH PARTIES ARE AFFECTING THE COVERAGE AND HOW?

40. In the case of Iraq, the powerful international mass media that determine the agenda of local media usually depend on Western or international sources more than on Iraqi local official or private sources. The result is that the Iraqi government or the Iraqi NGOs are portrayed in the Western media on the basis of the least standard of balance with reactions being measured as depending on the positions taken against them. Therefore, the information flowing from their part are not taken as credible since they compete with institutions that have influence and high expertise, whether in public relations or in setting political and media agendas.
41. These include the United Nations, the United States Department of State, the United States Department of Defence, the White House, the public relations firms and the lobbying groups that support Israel, the British Foreign Ministry, the Office of the British Prime Minister, and the media institutions that support the Gulf countries and take a position against the Iraqi regime for fear that the latter might threaten the stability in the region. The combination of the positions of these institutions outweighs the position expressing sympathy with the Iraqi people regarding the economic sanctions.

42. On the other hand, the Iraqi regime is an authoritarian system that lacks pluralism. The government, which controls all mass media, and the Ba'ath party are the sole decision-making bodies. Therefore, the Iraqi official media (there is no independent media or media representing the opposition) are totally committed to serving the interests of the regime – including using the suffering to consolidate the position of the regime.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS TOWARDS ACCURACY AND CONSISTENCY?

43. The following straightforward conclusions are possible in this case. They are relevant at the local, regional (Arab), and international levels:
- there is no consistency in adopting the human rights aspect in covering the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq;
 - coverage is selective;
 - there is a lack of credible (and verifiable) incoming information;
 - accuracy is violated not necessarily through the forging of facts, but in many cases by obscuring or ignoring the comprehensive dimensions of the issue being tackled;
 - finally, the continuation of sanctions combined to the retreat of attention makes it difficult to find the right approach in renewing the coverage of the human rights aspect of the issue.