

## **Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing**

### **“An Oversight Hearing on Waste, Fraud and Abuse in U.S. Government Contracting in Iraq”**

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In the chill January days when Pentagon officials were mapping the blueprint for a new Iraq, a paper was circulated here in Washington proposing a free, impartial and independent Iraqi Media Network. The paper stated, “Whilst democracy requires a free press, at the same time it requires one that is accountable to the society and the individuals within it, which it serves.”

It was a good plan. It would model IMN as a public broadcast network similar to PBS or the BBC, two of the most respected broadcasters in the world. So I joined a small group of American and Iraqi expatriate journalists who signed on to bring honest and professional radio and TV to Iraq after the fall of Baghdad. The Iraq Media Network went on the air with radio April 10 and television May 13. It was greeted with great anticipation by Iraqis, who expected that after 35 years of Saddam Hussein’s self-serving propagand, a new free and democratic media would be created that would make the new governing elements transparent and accountable and generate credible debate on the reconstruction of Iraq.

Iraqis were already grumbling that they were not safe in the streets, that it took three hours waiting in line to buy a tank of gas and that electricity had not been effectively restored. Even so, there were high hopes that American know-how would at least deliver what Americans do best—innovative, interesting television entertainment and reasonably honest news.

Now seven months later, like so many of the goals and hopes for the new Iraq, a credible media has not been realized. The failure to establish television “accountable to the society” is strongly felt. Instead, IMN has become an irrelevant mouthpiece for Coalition Provisional Authority propagand, managed news and mediocre programs.

I have trained journalists after the fall of tyrannies in Bosnia, Romania and Afghanistan. I don’t blame the Iraqi journalists for the failure of IMN. They daily ignore serious threats branding them “American collaborators” and work for insufficient salaries.

Although unschooled in the basic principles of democratic journalism, once they realized

it was OK to responsibly confront authority, they caught on fast. It was in this geographic region that the first written words were recorded 5,000 years ago and where the first laws, the Code of Hammurabi, were enacted. This highly literate society hungers for intelligent communication and a responsible media. There is a saying in the Middle East that Cairo writes, Beirut publishes and Baghdad reads.

Few people take pride in a free press more than Americans. Since the fall of Baghdad, more than 207 new publications have sprung up along with IMN and a handful of radio stations. It was a complicated media world I joined in Iraq. Most publications are sponsored by political or religious interest groups with rigid agendas. Some Iraqi editors even embraced the advice of a *Chicago Tribune* editor during the Civil War; “If no news, send rumors.” Some 5,000 employees of the old Ministry of Information were sent packing after the war. Many were trained propagandists for Saddam. They simply went home and continued writing lies and disinformation.

Obviously, journalism training was urgently needed. A brutal form of training was delivered by the U.S. Army and CPA officials when they found stories offensive. They visited the offices of offending newspapers and often left them padlocked and in ruins. No mediation, no appeal. If the *Washington Post* reported terrorist threats or bin Laden statements in Baghdad today, it would probably be closed down.

My Iraq journalist friends tell me that CPA’s “Code of Conduct,” which bans “intemperate speech that could incite violence,” is “selective democracy,” similar in spirit if not in effect to censorship by Saddam Hussein. Iraqi journalists also tell me they suspect it was at the urging of CPA that the Iraqi Governing Council banned Al-Jazeera and Al Arabiya satellite news from its news conferences for two weeks last October, which only served to further diminish credibility for the council, already regarded with suspicion by many Iraqis. Since then, Al Arabiya’s office in Baghdad has been closed by the CPA and the Governing Council.

What should be America’s greatest exports to the world — our Bill of Rights and the First Amendment — could have been effectively transplanted here and encouraged to grow as one of the foundations of a just society. It didn’t happen.

The original plan for IMN appears to have been jettisoned by officials at CPA who were more interested in managing news for both Iraqis and Americans. The United States has a responsibility to effectively explain its positions and policies to Iraqis, to Americans and to the world, but not at the price of making IMN into another Voice of America. Through a combination of incompetence and indifference, CPA has destroyed the fragile credibility of IMN. Once diminished, credibility is hard to restore. The reasons are many:

— A revolving door of officials with no credible television or journalism experience dictated plans and policy to IMN.

— A surprising lack of operating capital, in spite of IMN’s being the most expensive U.S. government media project in history at an estimated \$4 million a month, forced IMN

to run on a shoestring and look like it. There were no funds for basic equipment such as camera batteries, tripods or editing equipment. A \$500 request for a satellite dish to downlink the Reuters news feed was refused. A \$200 request for printing my training manual in Arabic for reporters was turned down.

— Lack of planning for program production or acquisition resulted in illegal airing of copyrighted European and Hollywood film tapes confiscated from the mansion of Saddam's son Uday.

— IMN staff were ordered to cover endless daily CPA news conferences, interviews and photo opportunities, leaving little time and few facilities to cover genuine news stories initiated by IMN reporters on the street.

— The right of “collective bargaining,” another American concept, was trashed by CPA management when IMN staff twice went on strike for higher wages. IMN staff were told in effect, “Our way or the highway.” CPA based staff salaries on the old Ministry of Information pay scale, which paid a reporter the equivalent of 120 U.S. dollars a month. Some staff members have already quit to join agencies that pay market rates.

— The first news director, Ahmad Al Rikaby, a sort of Arabic Tom Brokaw, was a respected and credible Iraqi expatriate journalist, well known as the voice of Radio Free Iraq. Al Rikaby had resisted CPA dictates demanding managed news. When he fired staff troublemakers or Baathists, CPA rehired them and insisted only it could hire or fire IMN staff. Al Rikaby's authority was so compromised he resigned.

— IMN was envisioned to help Iraqis talk to each other. It was to be a national media voice that would give them a sense of nationhood and identity. It was to be a chance for communicating among the regions, political factions and religions of Iraq. It was to be an answering voice to those who would keep enmity alive by exploiting the differences and continuing to fragment the society Saddam built. It was to have established credible news and public affairs programs in regional stations that could be rebroadcast on the network, allowing Kurd, Shia and Sunni to hear each other's points of view. This would have at least helped bandage old wounds. It would have encouraged discussion and debate for the direction of a new Iraq. Although CPA improved transmitter and broadcast facilities throughout Iraq, it failed miserably to persuade staff in many regional stations to cooperate with IMN. The 101st Airborne, using contingency funds, has largely sponsored the broadcast station in Mosul, Iraq, which has resisted being folded into the IMN family and accepting the base salaries being paid in Baghdad.

— Incredibly, the vital training of IMN reporters was turned over to Dubai satellite stations Al Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, which often produce slanted, biased and anti-American news.

— Instead of creating and encouraging local TV productions, CPA bought old programs from Middle East Broadcasting and Lebanese Broadcasting.

— CPA didn't allow its journalists to edit, analyze or otherwise "filter" its news conferences, interviews and photo ops. Public diplomacy is one thing, but CPA has ignored our own democratic ideals in its role as the overseer of IMN. Destroying the credibility of IMN has left CPA without an effective communications conduit to the Iraqi people. A recent State Department poll revealed that little more than one out of every 10 Iraqis watches IMN. Two out of three said they watch Al-Jazeera or Al Arabiya on satellite. If Ambassador Paul Bremer wants his views heard by the Iraqi people, he should buy time on Al Jazeera.

— The British government program "Toward Freedom" was scheduled daily in spite of strong objections of the IMN staff. This hour-long program, directly financed by No. 10 Downing Street, is aired without attribution. Iraqis conditioned by 35 years of Saddam's State Television recognize propaganda when they see it.

Instead of effectively controlling the problems, CPA in November changed IMN's name to Iraqia Network and hired the J. Walter Thompson company to mount a publicity campaign to convince Iraqis that IMN or Iraqia was credible.

The stakes are high and getting higher every day. President George W. Bush has spoken of "engaging in the battle of ideas in the Arab world." But in Iraq we have already lost the first round by failing to establish credible media, let alone influencing the rest of the Arab world.

In 1968 on the wall of the U.S. Embassy lobby in Saigon, I noticed a framed quotation from "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," by T.E. Lawrence: "It is better that they do it imperfectly than that you do it perfectly. For it is their war and their country and your time here is limited."

It seemed like a good idea to Lawrence in 1917, and it seemed like an even better idea to me in Vietnam in 1968. So 35 years later I gave that same quote to both Jay Garner and Paul Bremer, our proconsuls in Baghdad, and respectfully suggested they keep it in mind. There is no evidence that either of them ever did.

Forget the colonial attitude of "Lawrence of Arabia" and his heirs that the locals would only do it "imperfectly." Iraqis are in fact much better suited to repairing 1950s technology in electric power stations and collecting street intelligence to combat terrorism, and yes, Iraqis are entirely capable of reporting and producing television news and entertainment for their fellow Iraqis. It is time to show Iraqis the respect due by letting them do it themselves. It is time to help them to select their own path to a democratic new Iraq. As John Milton urged in 1644 before the British Parliament, "Let truth and falsehood grapple. Who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"