



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

GOVERNMENT-MEDIA TENSIONS IN IRAQI KURDISTAN:  
PERCEPTIONS OF KURDISH INDEPENDENT AND PRO-  
GOVERNMENT JOURNALISTS

by  
AYSEL SALMAN SEKMEC

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AYSEL SALMAN SEKMEC

Approved by:

---

Dr. Jad Melki, Assistant Professor  
Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies

Advisor

---

Dr. Samer Frangie, Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science & Public Administration

Member of Committee

---

Dr. Lokman Ibrahim Meho, University Librarian  
Department of Jafet Library

Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: December 18, 2011

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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Government-Media Tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan:  
Perceptions of Kurdish Independent and Pro-Government Journalists

This research study documented the different perceptions independent and pro-government journalists have for the root causes of government-media tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan, and whether these root causes may be one of the contributing factors for the lack of freedom of the print press in Iraqi Kurdistan. Freedom of the print press in the Middle East has always been very restricted. This holds true for Iraqi Kurdistan as well, according to recent literature and NGO data. Even after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the print press is subjected to censorship, self-censorship and interference by the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Kurdish constitution does, in theory, guarantee freedom of the media but this is far from the case in practice. Participants included independent as well as government-owned media professionals in Iraqi Kurdistan. Results showed that the government-media tensions were due to incomprehension between political officials and media professionals and the political nature of the media scene in Kurdistan. Participants indicated that the media was repressed in Iraqi Kurdistan and that the internal security forces of the ruling parties (Assayish) attacked journalists when covering taboo topics such as religion, sexual mores, gender issues, cultural issues, corruption, and the rulers and their families.

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## **Introduction**

Journalists world-wide struggle with the problem of media freedom and control, a problem particularly significant in the Middle East (Alterman, 1998, p. 45). Although freedom of the print press is guaranteed by the constitutions of most Middle Eastern countries, the media in this region are restricted in practice (Rugh, 2004, p. 37). Some of the main factors for the lack of freedom of the print press in the Arab world are “repressive press laws and regulations, severe censorship rules, strong ideological and political tensions” (Amin, 2001, p. 24). Equally important, government officials often fund or own media outlets in the Middle East (p. 35), and use them to disseminate their political policies (Alterman, 1998, p. 6). These facts often lead to government-media tensions, which is especially the case in Iraqi Kurdistan. In Iraqi Kurdistan political officials and independent journalists clash frequently because political officials accuse the independent press of jeopardizing “national security” with careless reports and the independent press accuse the government of repressing the freedom of the print press (Abdulrahman, 2007). Hence, this study will examine the different perceptions of independent as well as pro-government media professionals in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **1.1. Background**

The Iraqi Kurds’ history is strongly tied to the developments in Iraq as a whole. Iraq became an independent state in 1932 (Nyrop, 1979). According to Meho (1997), the British included the Kurdish provinces in the new state of Iraq because of the discovery of oil in Mosul. The Kurds rebelled between 1919 and mid-1940s against the British as well as the Iraqi regime for autonomy. In 1958, the Iraqi monarchy gave way to the rule of General Quassim who seemed to welcome a solution to the Kurdish struggle. Quassim asked the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the unofficial leader of the Iraqi Kurds, Mulla Mustafa

Barzani, to return from exile (Meho, 1997). However, it was clear pretty fast that Quassim had no intentions of granting the Iraqi Kurds what they wanted, namely, autonomy. Hence, in 1961 the rebellion against the Iraqi government began anew until in 1970, when the Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi government reached an agreement that gave the Iraqi Kurds semi-autonomy in Suleymaniyah, Dohuk, and Erbil (Nyrop, 1979, p. 225). Nonetheless, both sides had a different definition of autonomy (p. 225). While 1975 produced a new competing party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Meho, 1997), the year also gave way to a “renewal of the Kurdish struggle for autonomy” (Bengio, 1998, p. 110). During the 15-year-long struggle the Iraqi government used chemical weapons to exterminate Iraqi Kurds in Halabja in 1988. Due partially to these events in this part of Iraq, U.S.-allied forces intervened in 1991 and so created a safe haven for the Kurds in northern Iraq (Meho, 1997).

The aforementioned historical and political changes had effects on the development of the print press in Iraqi Kurdistan. However, not much can be found in the literature on the freedom and problems of the print press in general in Iraqi Kurdistan. Rugh (2004) is one of few scholars, who included Iraqi Kurdistan in his studies and described the printing press in pre-2003 Iraq as a “mobilization press”; the ruling regime used the press to mobilize the masses for its political programs (p. 31). During Saddam Hussein’s reign the media environment was such that if the press did not conform to his political agenda, journalists could be penalized with death if the president or other government officials were insulted (p. 37). After Saddam Hussein’s fall, however, the print media became more diverse with independent newspapers rapidly increasing in Iraq and Iraqi-Kurdistan (p. 117). Nevertheless, Hussein’s stringent media laws are still enforced in the region (Abdulrahman, 2007), despite article 15 of the Iraqi-Kurdish constitution that guarantees freedom of the press (UNPO, 2004).

Iraqi Kurdish journalists experience violence and repression in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Iraqi Kurdistan suffers from “deteriorating press freedom conditions” and “deadly violence and official harassment” (CPJ, 2010). Similarly, a United Nation’s report concluded, “The Kurdistan regional government authorities continue to subject journalists to harassment, arrest, and legal action for their reporting on government corruption, poor public services or other issues of public interest” (UNAMI, 2007, p. 11). Accusations of unjustified arrests, torture as well as politically motivated assassinations of journalists critical of the ruling government are reported on a regular basis in Iraqi Kurdistan (Abdulrahman, 2007). The estimated death toll of journalists killed since the Iraq war lies at 230, two of them being Kurdish (Reporters Without Borders, 2010). Both Soran Mama Hama and Serdast Osman, whose deaths are believed to have been committed by one of the two ruling political parties in Kurdistan (Azez, 2010), wrote articles critical of the KRG’s ruling methods.

Just like Kurdish independent journalists accuse the government of violence against journalists, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) accuses the independent press of working against “national interests” (Abdulrahman, 2007). Hama-Saeed (2010) reported, “Kurdish officials complain that the media, especially the independent outlets which are highly critical of the authorities, are unprofessional and only publish negative stories. Officials accuse journalists of siding with the opposition.” The conflict of the government-media relationship in addition to the different perceptions on the root causes of the government-media tensions, illuminate the relevance and importance of this study.

## 1.2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to juxtapose the different perceptions independent and pro-government journalists have for the root causes of government-media tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan and to establish whether these root causes may be one of the contributing factors for the lack of freedom of the print press in Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition, this study tried to show that as in other regions of the Middle East, the press in Iraqi Kurdistan is “inherently political” (Fandy, 2007, p. 138); hence, “news is politics” (Mellor, 2005, p. 78). Hampton (2010) stated that generally the role of the press is analogous to “genuine political power” (p. 3), which especially holds true for Iraqi Kurdistan, where political parties, political institutions, or the ruling regime, control the majority of media outlets and use them for their political aims.

The focus of this study was the print press because it is the oldest and most sophisticated form of media. Moreover, because there is no literature available on the Iraqi Kurdish media as a whole, I chose the print press as my MA thesis topic rather than delving into unknown fields such as the new media (broadcast, TV, internet, social networks). Furthermore, given the transitional phase that Kurdistan is undergoing, this topic is current and relevant. In addition, I chose Iraqi Kurdistan as my focus because of my own personal background. Being a Turkish Kurd, I had particular interest to create something of interest to the Kurdish community.

In order to find out Iraqi journalists’ perceptions of the root causes of the government-media tensions, I conducted 14 one-on-one interviews with media professionals in Iraqi Kurdistan; the participants consisted of media professionals from the independent and pro-government-owned/funded media outlets. Additionally, I conducted interviews with a member

of the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS) and a member of an international NGO in Kurdistan.

### **1.3. Significance of Study**

This study is important because it extended the existing literature on freedom of the print press in the Middle East. Although several doctoral studies were conducted in the last two decades on media freedom, no studies have been done on Iraqi Kurdistan. Hafez (2001) advanced that while Rugh's (2004) typologies of the press systems in the Middle East are still valid, "his analysis of freedom of speech and media freedom in individual countries no longer applies in some cases. The categorization of some countries has to be revised, and others bear traits of more than one category" (p. 5). Iraqi Kurdistan in particular, seems in dire need of that revision given the major events of the past two decades: the fall of Hussein, the US invasion in 2003, and the resulting changes in the political scene. The Iraqi Kurds have a semi-autonomous region in the northern outskirts of Iraq where the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) share power. These events had effects on the development of the press as well. Therefore, it was essential to take a closer look at the media developments in Iraqi Kurdistan "during the early years" to understand the course it will subsequently take (Ayalon, 1995, p. 246), and it seemed equally important to analyze the government-media and society-media relationships to understand the ruling government and its society (Rugh, 2004, p. xiv).

Moreover, this study aimed to offer evidence that may contribute to a call for new laws and regulations that will: (a) protect journalists from retaliation attacks by the KRG; (b) contribute to optimizing the actions of local and international NGOs pertaining to the right of

freedom of the press in Iraqi Kurdistan; (c) offer some transparency into the question of ownership and censorship in Iraqi Kurdistan; (d) serve as a stimulus to help raise awareness to the difficulties independent journalists face when active in Iraqi Kurdistan; and (e) serve as a guide for the development of university curricula when discussing freedom of the print press in the Middle East. Equally important, the study aimed to offer insights into the different perceptions of the root causes of government-media tensions of pro-government as well as independent journalists in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### **1.4. Definitions of Keywords**

In the context of this study, it is important to note here that “independent” refers to journalists or papers that are not affiliated with one of the ruling political parties. This does not necessarily mean that the journalists are politically neutral. In addition, the print press consists of independent dailies, bi-weeklies and weeklies, and magazines. Furthermore, Iraqi Kurdistan refers to the northern part of Iraq, a semi-autonomous region ruled by the Kurdistan Regional Government, which mainly consists of political officials from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and is home to Iraqi Kurds. These two political parties are the leading political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan.



## **Literature Review**

Understanding the historical development of the Arab media—but specifically the Iraqi Kurdish media in the Middle East—will give the reader a better idea of the media and their relationship to the ruling governments. Furthermore, making sense of the significance of censorship in the Arab world—but particularly in the northern outskirts of Iraq—is essential to understand the level of freedom of the print press in Iraqi Kurdistan. Hence, this chapter starts with a short historical account of the developments of the Arab media with focus on the Iraqi media. Then, I discuss the developments of the Iraqi media in detail. The second section offers a short historical overview of Iraqi Kurdistan. Finally, the last section gives a review of the literature on freedom of the print press, censorship, and self-censorship in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **2.1. History of Arab Media with Focus on the Iraqi Media**

This section offers a short historical overview of the developments the media have undergone in the Arab world with focus on Iraq's media history and the Iraqi media scene today. The next sub-section offers a discussion on media freedom and control in the Arab world with focus on media freedom and control in Iraq.

**History of Arab media.** Academics agree that newspapers served colonial political powers and missionary objectives in the Arab world (Mellor, 2005, p. 30), but took on a national-transformational role after gaining independence (Ayish, 2001, p. 115). The Arab media's historical development took a different historical course, according to each country's socio-political history (Ayalon, 2005, pp. 46, 54). However, using media as political mouthpieces for the distribution of government messages has always been part of the history of

the Arab media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (al-Musa, as cited in Ayish, 2001, p. 122; Amin, 2001, pp. 24-25; Ayish, 2001, p. 113; Fandy, 2007, p. 138; Mellor, 2005, p. 26).

Rugh (2004) distinguished between four media systems prevalent in the Arab world: “mobilization,” “loyalist,” “diverse,” and “transitional” (pp. 25-26). The mobilization press is used to mobilize the masses for the ruling regime’s political aims; the loyalist press is usually in private hands, though the papers are loyal to the regime; the diverse press shows more diversity and freedom of expression; and the transitional press system includes media outlets that are mostly government-owned but with a small number of privately- and party-owned papers (Rugh, 2004, pp. 25-26). While these four systems can still be applied to most Arab countries, socio-political changes in the Arab world make a revision of some countries necessary (Hafez, 2001, p. 5).

This is the case in Iraq, where Rugh (2004) described pre-2003 Iraq as having a “mobilization press” that started to show characteristics of a transitional press system with a diverse press after the fall of Saddam Hussein (pp. 30, 116). During the reign of the colonial powers, the press played only a minor role in the struggle against British control in Iraq (Ayalon, 1995, pp. 92). In the 1920s, political parties founded newspapers because it was in fashion to own one, but the life span of these papers was only as long as the political parties’ life span (p. 93). This allowed for high fluctuation in newspaper establishments. Only two newspapers—the Baghdadi *al-Istiqlal* (Independence) and the daily *al-Bilad* (nation)—had a long life span because they were of better quality (p. 93).

However, with Iraq’s independence on 13 October, 1932 (Nyrop, 1979, p. 40), the press started serving the Iraqi Monarchy’s “nationalists’ aims” (McFadden, as cited in Mellor, 2005, p.

29). In 1969, the Ba'th party rose to power and decreed a new publication law, declaring the media independent and "the fourth branch" (*al-sulta al-rabi'a*) of government; in practice, however, these media outlets became the voice of the ruling regime such as the dailies, *al-Thawra* (Revolution), and *al-Jumhuriyya* (Republic) (Bengio, 1998, p. 8). It was an era in which most media outlets were in the hands of the Iraqi government (Hurrat & Leidig, 1994, p. 104) and in which the ruling regime used the press to mobilize the population for its political programs (Rugh, 2004, p. 34). In fact, until the advent of the Iraq war in 2003, Iraq's media served only the purposes of the Ba'th party's political aims (Hurrat & Leidig, 1994, p. 98).

After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the press in Iraq went through a transformation; the press was more diverse, and it also showed signs of a transitional press system (Rugh, 2004, p. 117). Independent newspapers, representing the diverse population in the region thrived in Iraq and Iraqi-Kurdistan (p.117). Fandy (2007), however, asserted that even media outlets that are declared independent in the Arab world are not so in practice because they are either directly or indirectly controlled by the government (p. 8). In addition, Mellor (2005) pointed out that this new gained diversity is "threatened by lawlessness," for journalists resort to self-censorship to avoid retaliation attacks by political groups (pp. 57-58).

Al-Marashi (2007) stated that Iraq's media is dominated by "ethno-sectarian 'media empires' " (p.10). According to Ricciardi (2010), a great part of Iraq's media outlet has become mouthpieces for political parties. Similarly, Amos (2010) added that "there are no neutral outlets" (p. 4) because media outlets are usually backed by a political party. This could not have been more obvious than during the 2010 election campaigns. Amos (2010) cited Hiwa Osman, a Kurdish journalist and media development specialist, as saying that media outlets usually followed the political party that funded them (Osman, as cited in Amos, 2010, p. 4).

**Media freedom and control in the Arab world.** According to Mellor (2005), censorship has been part of the Arab media since its inception (p. 30). Ayish (2001) attributed this prevalent censorship to “social and political control” (p. 122). Furthermore, Amin (2001) claimed that censorship is “tolerated and expected as a form of civic responsibility” in the region (p. 24); however, no other scholars mention censorship as a civic duty. Today, the Arab world has hardly any freedom of expression under the ruling governments (p. 40). Alterman (1998) identified four reasons for censorship in the Arab world: “political debate,” “criticism of country’s rulers or their families,” “writing of a religious nature,” and “social and sexual mores” (pp. 45-47). Ayish (2001) added that regimes also censored information that appeared to damage “neighboring countries and their leaders” and “private citizens” (p. 124).

Hafez (2001), however, indicated that the extent of press freedom depends on the “political system” in the respective countries; according to him, “semiauthoritarian and patrimonial” systems had a more diverse press than “totalitarian and technocratic systems” (p. 6). Additionally, with each changing regime, policies on freedom of speech changed too, resulting in media systems that are always in flux (Hafez, 2001, p. 6).

According to Weaver (1990), leaders in the Middle East argue that press freedom is a jeopardy to “national security.” He continued that Arab rulers often contend that “freedom is a relative concept that has to be carefully applied in the context of responsibility” and that a free press as known and defined in the West cannot be reproduced in the Middle East (as cited in Ayish, 2001, p. 122). In addition Mellor (2005) stated that the reason for the lack of press freedom is that the press is seen as a potential danger to the “ideological foundations of governments” (p. 30). Because press freedom is seen as a threat to “national security” (Weaver, as cited in Ayish, 2001, p. 122), ruling regimes control media outlets directly or indirectly; one

way is through direct transfer of funds to the print publications, and another way is by acquisition of large amounts of subscriptions (Ayalon, 1995, p. 125). Rewards and subsidies also serve to influence the press in the ruling regime's favor (p. 123). However, "the ultimate form of censorship [is by] planned assassinations" (Fandy, 2007, p. 5).

A further way to control newspaper content was by passing restrictive media laws. In 1857, the Ottoman government passed the first Printing and Publication law (Ayalon, 1995, p. 23), which forced publishers to get licenses and allowed the regime to censor news content before papers could be published. After the Ottoman Empire dissolved, governments still used oppressive media laws (Hafez, 2001, p. 24) to consolidate their control of the media (Ayish, 2001, p. 122). With these laws the regimes controlled who could own a paper and who could actually enter the journalism profession, and prohibited journalists from reporting on taboo topics (Mellor, 2005). In addition, censorship laws gave the government the right to exert censorship on papers when it thought that "national security" was at risk (Mellor, 2005). An exemplifying case is Egypt's "law 93," which allowed for journalists to receive jail sentences and large fines (Ayish, 2001). Ayish (2001) continued that even countries like Lebanon—classified by Rugh (2004) as diverse—are dominated by restrictive media laws. However, new liberal press laws were passed in the 1990s in Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and Qatar, allowing free speech and rights to individuals. However, this liberalism was based on the individual government's perception of what these rights constituted (Ayish, 2001).

Accordingly, the press in the Middle East showed signs of "nomadic traits." When the media environment became too restrictive in Beirut, the Arab press moved to Cairo and Alexandria, and from there to Paris, London, and New York (Ayalon, 1995, p. 46). Europe

became the new haven for many Arab newspapers because of its less restrictive governments (Alterman, 1998, p. 7). The press' choice of a new home country was based on the colonial influences; while Lebanese papers found a new home in France; most Gulf Arab newspapers settled in London (p. 8).

**Media freedom and control in Iraq.** Media freedom and control in Iraq showed similar developments. Amin (2001) highlighted the fact that Iraq received one of the worst negative censorship ratings in the Arab world (p. 24). Iraqi media has known only short spells of freedom (Bengio, 1998, p. 8). As elsewhere in the Middle East, "the rigid Ottoman Press Law" was in effect until 1931 and was followed by a new media law that was just as repressive (Ayalon, 1995, p. 94). However, the print press enjoyed an extent of press freedom under the Iraqi monarchy and then under Quassim's rule. After Quassim's fall, however, the new regime passed new laws, withdrawing publishers' licenses as punishment for being critical of the ruling regime (Bengio, 1998, p. 8). To make matters worse, the Iraqi press was nationalized in 1967, allowing for more government control (p. 8). The press, for example, was prohibited from using commercial advertising to finance itself, making it dependent on government funding (p. 8).

After the Ba'th party claimed control of power in Iraq in 1969, freedom of the press did not exist (Rugh, 2004, p. 37). Under Saddam's reign, the media environment was such that if the press did not conform to his political agenda, or if the president or other government officials were insulted, journalists could be penalized to death (p. 37). The Ba'th Socialist Party (BSP) made censorship part of their "communication philosophy;" only news were published that did not disagree with the parties "ideology, principles, or policies" (Hurrat & Leidig, 1994, p. 104). The government exercised censorship directly by hiring media professionals loyal to the ruling

regime and indirectly by forcing journalists to exercise self-censorship when publishing news (Bengio, 1999, p. 105).

Furthermore, Saddam's son Uday Hussein, head of the Iraqi Journalists' Union, disposed of great numbers of journalists who failed to praise his father (Rugh, 2004, p. 38). Other journalists were also forced to join the Ba'th party, and publications representing an opposite view of the Ba'th party's were banned (p. 38). Even though the ruling regime did not officially own all the media outlets in the country, the media environment was the same as if it did (p. 35). In addition, to ensure press cooperation, those who relayed Saddam's messages successfully were generously rewarded with materialistic gifts such as a Mercedes (Bengio, 1998, p. 8; Fandy, 2007, p. 6).

With the start of the Iraq war in 2003, the Iraqi Information Ministry was replaced by the Iraqi Media Network (IMN) and left in charge of US administrator Paul Bremer (Reporters Without Borders, 2003). The purpose of the IMN, according to Bremer, was to allow the Iraqi media to finally work under free and independent media laws (Reporters Without Borders, 2003). Reporters Without Borders (2003), however, cited an anonymous article in which the US administrator was labeled "totalitarian" after issuing decree no. 7. This decree banned "incitement to violence against US-British forces against ethnic and religious minorities." Only recently did the Freedom house World press report (2009), using "universal criteria" (p. 9), rank Iraq as number 148 on their list and stated that it is "Not Free."

As the section above has shown, Arab media has had a short history compared to its western counterparts. Furthermore, practices of using media outlets as political mouthpieces have been prevalent in the Middle East since the inception of Arab media. Equally, censorship

and repression of media has always been part of Arab media and still is today. Censorship is even seen as a form of civic responsibility. Governments often use “national security” to reserve the right to censor publications. In addition, repressive laws which controlled who could own a paper, prohibited reports on taboo topics, and even stated who could enter the journalism profession, were passed to muzzle journalist’s voices.

Iraq’s media has shown similar developments insofar that although media development is dependent on each country’s individual socio-political development, Iraq’s media were, as in the rest of the Middle East, (a) used as political mouthpieces, and (b) repressed by the ruling regime. As in other Arab countries, Iraqi rulers also used repressive laws and regulations to exert control over media outlets and anyone breaking these laws would face severe punishments. Consequently, Iraq did not enjoy media freedom under Saddam’s rule because almost all media outlets were in the hands of the ruling regime. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, although Iraq’s media scene has become more diverse (Rugh, 2004), it still lacks media freedom. Iraq’s media are dominated by “ethno-sectarian ‘media empires’” with no neutral media outlets. Depending on who funds them, media outlets follow one or another party. The fact that media outlets represent specific political parties’ views, forces readers to read more than one paper to get all sides of a story.

## **2.2. History of Iraqi Kurdistan**

This section offers a short historical overview of the Iraqi Kurds’ struggle for independence in northern Iraq.

The history of the Kurdish press has to be seen against the backdrop of the Kurdish struggle for independence in Kurdistan (Meho, 1997, p. 14). The Iraqi Kurds’ history has been



filled with one rebellion after another—first against the British army, and then against the Iraqi regime—and followed by one disappointment after another (p. 14). The Kurds are a minority with no nation to call their homeland. After World War I, the Allied Forces did not live up to their promise of establishing a homeland for the Kurds; hence, the Kurdish rebellion was born in 1919 and would last until the present time (Nyrop, 1979, p. 224). This struggle gave rise to Kurdish political parties such as Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (p. 56). Finally, in the early 1970s, the Kurds attained a degree of autonomy in the governorates of Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk, and Erbil—also known as Kurdistan (Meho, 1997, p. 14). When the Iraqi regime did not keep their end of the agreement (Nyrop, 1979, p. 225), tensions erupted again in 1975 (Bengio, 1998, p. 110). The clashes led to an international intervention in 1991, which in turn led to a creation of a safe haven in Iraqi Kurdistan (Meho, 1997).

This brief historical overview has shown that the Iraqi Kurds' history has been characterized by a continuous struggle for autonomy. Furthermore, two leading parties have always been at the front of this struggle, namely, the KDP and the PUK. These two parties are ruling the semiautonomous region in the northern outskirts of Iraq today.

### **2.3. History of Iraqi Kurdish Media**

This section discusses how Kurdish media outlets are used as political tools with the majority of media outlets owned or funded by political officials. In the next sub-section, I discuss media freedom and control, which are important in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan, because political officials or the KRG still exert censorship on news content. The third sub-section offers a description of media laws and regulations in Iraqi Kurdistan, where Kurdistan's

first media law is not implemented and journalists are still tried under the old 1969 Ba'th Penal Code.

**Media as a political tool.** As in the rest of Iraq and other regions in the Middle East, the print media have been used as political tools for Kurdish political officials to achieve their political aims. For example, in the years of 1970 to 1974 the press played an important role in the struggle between the Iraqi regime and the Kurds' struggle for autonomy. Barzani's newspaper *al-Ta'akhi* (Brotherhood) used the power of the written word to challenge the Ba'th party's politics towards the Iraqi Kurds and their struggle for autonomy (Bengio, 1999, p. 116). The two dominating parties, KDP and PUK, hold ownership over various media outlets (Abdulrahman, 2007). Though Kurdistan's media environment is separated into two groups, namely, party-owned and independent media outlets, the overwhelming majority of the 900 publications are mouthpieces for political parties (Hama-Saeed, 2010). The fact that media outlets are used as political mouthpieces was never more apparent than during the 2010 elections, when media outlets were used to either promote a certain political candidate, or to viciously attack the opposition's political candidates and independent media outlets (Hama-Saeed, 2010).

**Media freedom and control.** Fandy (2007) ascertained that, even though, independent media outlets are by definition not tied to the ruling government (p. 4), the media scene in Iraqi Kurdistan showed signs of what Rugh (2004) called a "mobilization press" rather than a "diverse press" (p. 25). While there is in fact more diversity among print publications, they are often directly or indirectly tied to a political party. According to Hampton (2010), "the notion of 'independence' is essential to the function of the press as a 'Fourth Estate' " (p. 5), meaning the press needs to be an independent entity with no association or connection to the government or

any political parties. The question that arises then is whether Arab journalists are advocates of democratization or whether by self-censoring, they cooperate with the rulers of their respective countries (Hafez, 2001, p. 8).

With the withdrawal of Saddam from the north in 1993, many independent newspapers flourished in Iraqi Kurdistan (Rugh, 2004, pp. 52-53). In addition, with the ousting of Saddam in 2003, the region experienced an increase of freedom of expression. By the same token, the two dominating parties began a national distribution of their papers after Saddam's fall in 2003 (p. 117). Although the KDP and PUK had influence and control over most journalists—compared to the rest of Iraq—independent papers dared to publish critical articles about the two dominating parties (pp. 52-53).

However, seven years later, journalists are still popular targets for political officials' wrath. The KDP and PUK had permission to keep their militias, leading many journalists to use self-censorship because of fear of retaliation attacks (Anonymous, as cited in Reporters without Borders, 2003). Sherry Ricciardi (2011) confirmed this notion, revealing that Iraqi Kurdistan's media was still oppressed and that journalist's experienced violence by the government's security forces (p. 26). Hence, the majority of the existing media outlets in Iraqi Kurdistan circumvent critical issues about the ruling government, political officials, internal security forces, intelligence agencies, and the KDP and PUK (US Human Rights Report, 2009).

**Media laws and regulations in Iraqi Kurdistan.** The Kurdish parliament passed Kurdistan's first media law, article 35, in September 2008. This new law allows more media freedom by abolishing jail sentences for press-related offenses and preventing the government from shutting down newspapers (Hama-Saeed, 2010). However, journalists charged with a

press-related offense, are still tried under the 1969 Ba'th Penal Code, under which journalists can be sentenced to jail terms (US Human Rights Report, 2009). Moreover, no laws exist that protect journalists from retaliation attacks by the governing body (UK-parliamentary fact-finding visit to Kurdistan, 2008).

However, using the judiciary to muzzle journalists' voices is on the agenda in Iraqi Kurdistan (Abdel Dayem, 2010). Hama-Saeed is cited in Ricciardi (2011) as saying that since politicians are afraid to lose their grip on power, they use "excessive lawsuits" to scare off journalists. An exemplifying case is the lawsuit brought by the KDP against *Rozhanama* weekly, an opposition-owned paper. An official from Barzani's office confirmed the lawsuit and continued that they wanted to see the papers proof for the corruption charges (Kurdnet, 2010). However, *Rozhanama* weekly was sued for one billion dollars for the supposed defamation (Kurdnet, 2010), while article 9 in the new media law says that media professionals would be fined an amount not less than (1,000,000) million dinars [855.07 dollars] and no more than (5,000,000) million dinars [4,2717 dollars] (The Law of Journalism in Kurdistan, 2009, p.10).

The question is how much freedom of expression is there in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to Dagher (2010) the 2008 press law guarantees freedom of expression. However, it punishes those who "insult religious beliefs and symbols," and sow "hatred and discord." In addition, writing about the lives of private citizens is punishable as well (Dagher, 2010). Journalists, however, are being killed for sensitive reports. The murder of Serdast Osman, who is believed to have been murdered for a satirical article about Barzani's daughter, has stressed the restrictions of press freedom (Dagher, 2010). Another case is Soran Mama Hama (killed in July 2008) who is believed to have been killed for an article about a prostitution ring, involving police and security officials (Azez, 2010). Ziad al Ajili, director of the Journalistic Freedom Observatory

noted, “They are imposing restrictions on journalists-and the direction they are taking is a move toward authoritarianism” (as cited in Amos, 2010, p. 30).

Iraqi Kurdistan’s media history—though short compared to the rest of the Middle East—shows a similar course of direction. Media outlets are used as political mouthpieces and independent media outlets are repressed. Moreover, most of the estimated 900 print publications are in the hands of political parties. Furthermore, the courts do not enforce the new media law that gave hope for an improved Kurdish media scene. Instead, journalists are hit with libel and defamation suits and are tried under the 1969 Ba’th Penal Code, allowing courts to sentence them to jail terms.

#### **2.4. Summary of Literature Review**

As the literature review has shown, Arab media have had a short history compared to their western counterparts. Despite the different historical course each country has taken, all Arab countries have one thing in common: media outlets have been used as political mouthpieces since the inception of Arab media with some exceptions like Lebanon, which was ranked 56 (partly free) in the 2009 Freedom house World press report (p. 30). Furthermore, censorship and repression have always been part of Arab media; censorship is even seen as a form of civic responsibility. Governments often use “national security” to reserve the right to censor publications. Equally important, repressive laws control who could own a paper, prohibit reports on taboo topics, and specify who could enter the journalism profession; hence, these laws muzzle journalist’s voices.

Although media development depends on each country’s individual socio-political development, Iraq’s media were, as in the rest of the Middle East, (a) used as political

mouthpieces, and (b) repressed by the ruling regime. As in other Arab countries, Iraqi rulers also used repressive laws and regulations to exert control over media outlets, and anyone breaking these laws would face severe punishments. Consequently, Iraq did not enjoy media freedom under Saddam's rule; rather, all media outlets were in the hands of the ruling regime. After the fall of Saddam, albeit Iraq's media scene became more diverse, it still lacks media freedom.

Even Iraqi Kurdistan's short media history took a similar course. Media outlets are used as political mouthpieces, and independent media outlets are repressed. In addition, most of the estimated 900 print publications are in the hands of political parties. Furthermore, the media law that gave hope for a free media scene in Iraqi Kurdistan is still not implemented. Instead, journalists are tried under the 1969 Ba'th Penal Code, allowing courts to sentence journalists to jail terms.

## **2.5. Research Questions**

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of Kurdish independent and pro-government journalists for the root factors for government-media tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan?

RQ 1a: What are the red line topics that trigger government-media conflicts in Iraqi Kurdistan?

RQ 1b: What are the structural and practical problems that inhibit journalism in Iraqi Kurdistan?

RQ 1c: To what extent do political parties control the judicial system and professional unions and what implications does their control have for the media environment of Kurdistan?

RQ 1d: To what extent does favoritism and bribery have an influence on journalism in Kurdistan?

## **Methodology**

This chapter explains the methods used in carrying out this study. I chose to use qualitative instead of quantitative research for this study because it permits more flexibility in a natural research setting, which helps reach an in-depth understanding of the topic under study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 49). Furthermore, qualitative fieldwork allows the researcher to go beyond a certain set of questions, allowing the analyst to gain more data about the phenomenon under study (Silverman, 2001, p.32). Moreover, Gorman and Clayton (2005) stated that the advantages of qualitative research methods are the first-hand collection of raw data “through the insights gain[ed] from actually being on site” (p. 4).

Silverman (2001) listed observation, analyzing texts and documents, interviews, and recording and transcribing as the four major qualitative methods in qualitative research (p. 11). For the purpose of this study, I used “qualitative in-depth interviews” for the collection of data. Patton (2002) stated that since “we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions” interviews are important because they “allow [the researcher] to enter into the other person’s perspective” (p. 341). Moreover, I chose to conduct one-on-one interviews because they “are most beneficial as a research tool when the topic being explored involves change, novelty, or uniqueness and the people being interviewed play influential or unique roles” (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 269). Furthermore, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) stated that the advantage of in-depth interviews is the “wealth of detail [they] provide” (p. 135). Likewise, Silverman (2001) highlighted the importance of open-ended interview questions when the goal of a study is to attain a greater understanding of people’s experiences (p. 13).



### **3.1. Participant Sample**

The three primary methods for choosing participants for any given study are census, random sample, and non-random sample (Pointdexter & McComb, 2000, p. 79). For the purpose of this study, the selection of participants was based on a non-random sample. Out of the seven different non-random sampling methods (quota sampling, theoretical sampling, snowball sampling, typical-case sampling, critical-case sampling, convenience sampling, and focus-group sampling) the “snowball sampling” method seemed the most appropriate for the nature of the study conducted (Deacon, Pickering, Golding, & Graham, 1999, p.53). Initial contacts recommend other potential participants. These participants then suggest further contacts relevant to the study (p. 53). Deacon et al. (1999) further stated that snowball sampling is routinely used for “either closed or informal social groupings,” whose knowledge and recommendations are essential to make new contacts that are useful for the study (p. 53). This initial list of names eventually diverges into a number of “key names” relevant for the study at hand (Patton, 2002, p. 237).

My sampling selection started with a contact at the American University in Beirut (AUB) who referred me to a media professional in Erbil, Kurdistan and the contact in Erbil later referred me to other media professionals relevant for this study. Research on the internet (Google) enabled me to identify preliminary interview participants. After acquiring a list of Iraqi and Kurdish print publications from the internet, I reduced the list to only those papers appropriate to my study. The print publications important to my study had to be Kurdish, independent, and government-owned/funded. In addition, I researched articles about the press in Iraqi Kurdistan for names of independent print publications. Contacts in Iraqi Kurdistan referred me to other potential participants. To ensure a more objective depiction of the topic under study, it was

important to select a variety of different participants representing all actors involved in the problematic of the study (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Hence, I chose to interview media professionals from both, the independent and government-owned/funded media outlets. The participants consisted of two journalists from three newspapers owned/funded by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP); six journalists from the most popular independent newspapers in Iraqi Kurdistan; one freelancer, who has had experience working for party-owned/funded papers as well as independent media outlets; the editors-in-chief of two shadow newspapers (papers funded by a political official inside a political party); a member of the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS); and finally a member of the Dutch NGO Independent Media Center in Kurdistan (IMCK) (see Table 1).

Pointdexter and McComb (2000) noted that the proper sample size for a study should be “large enough that the research expert . . . will feel confident in the results of the survey” (p. 83). The number of participants for this study was 14 as a result of the redundancy of the information obtained. When the “data collection stop[ped] revealing new things and the evidence started to repeat itself,” I discontinued the interview process (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 43).

### **3.2. Research Instrument**

I used pre-determined and Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved questions (see Appendix B) because an interview guide helps using the time more efficiently by only focusing on questions relevant to the study and cutting out those questions that are of lesser importance (Patton, 2002, p. 343). The interview questions addressed issues such as freedom of the press, media laws, challenges journalists face while working in Kurdistan, government-print media relationship, government policies concerning freedom of the press, and censorship.

My research instrument was a predetermined and IRB-approved list of questions. The main questions comprised Research Questions (RQ) 1a-1d. The answers to RQs 1a-1d led directly to answering RQ 1. See Appendix B for a list of the IRB-approved questions addressing RQs 1a-1d. Depending on the answer of the participants, follow-up questions were asked. The procedure was repeated with every participant.

### **3.3. Procedure Used**

Patton (2002) stated that “fieldwork is the central activity of qualitative inquiry” (p. 48). It is important to go into the field because it allows the researcher to experience the participants in their own environments. This in turn permits for better understanding of the participants and their daily routines (p. 48). In addition, Wimmer and Dominick (2006) stated that participants offer a more accurate picture of their daily routine because they “are not influenced by the experimental situation” (p. 245). Bryman (1988) added that “field notes or extended transcripts” are important because they allow the reader to form their own view about the participants’ opinions (as cited in Silverman, 2001, p. 33).

My first interview participant was a media professional I was referred to by a Kurdish colleague at AUB. This contact informed me of the media scene in Kurdistan and provided me with the phone numbers of further potential participants. I performed phone calls to the potential participants as indicated in Table 1. After explaining the nature of the study, I set up an appointment for an interview (see Appendix A for the script of the conversation). These interview participants then provided me with further contacts. I repeated the procedure of calling the journalists, introducing myself, explaining the nature of the study, and then scheduling an interview appointment when the participant agreed to participate in the study. Before the start of the interview, an oral consent form educated the participants (a) of the purpose of the study, (b) that the interview was voluntary, and (c) that they could discontinue the interview at any time.

Based on the aforementioned literature, I decided to conduct fieldwork in Erbil and Suleymaniyah, Kurdistan from 3 to 13 April 2011. I spent the first seven days in Erbil. On day eight, I traveled to Suleymaniyah with a staff member of IMCK. There, I conducted further interviews with journalists an IMCK staff member referred me to. A number of potential participants declined participation in the study due to time constraints. When I was to interview pro-government media professionals, the driver of the media professional picked me up and dropped me off at the headquarters of the respective print publication where the interview was to be conducted. However, when I was to interview independent journalists, I had to rely on public transportation to get to the headquarters of the respective media outlet.

Free-format or non-standardized interviewing procedures ensured all participants in this study “comprehend[ed] questions properly, ensure[d] generation of richer data, allow[ed] the interviewer to retain intervening influence, and allow[ed] for more flexibility during the interview” (Deacon et al., 1999, p. 54). Although I followed the question guide approved by the

IRB, questions had to be slightly changed with each individual participant because this study was an evolving study (see Appendix B for IRB approved list of questions guiding this study).

Table 1

*Newspapers under study & NGOs*

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Media Outlets	Political Affiliation	Funding
Kurdistan Knwe	PUK	PUK & copies sold
Agency Kurdistan news	Former PM Nechirwan Barzani	Former PM Nechirwan Barzani
Hawlati	Independent	Copies sold
Awene	Independent	Copies sold
Kurdish Globe	KDP	KRG, KDP & copies sold
Lvin	Independent	Copies sold
Haftana magazine	Independent	Copies sold
Rudaw	Independent	Copies sold & profits from projects
Radio Newroz/political analyst	Independent	freelancer
Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate	Independent	Membership fees, KRG & copies sold
International Media Center in Kurdistan (IMCK)	Independent	Press Now

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Though I was aware of each participant’s identity, I ensured participant confidentiality, by guaranteeing participants’ anonymity and reiterating that the interview was voluntary (Pointdexter & McCombs, 2000, p. 27). Consequently, names of participants were stored in files separate from the files containing collected data such as interview notes, documents, and

observational notes on the student investigator's private, locked computer, which was kept in a locked cabinet at the student investigator's home (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 116). The data will be destroyed three years after completion of this study, following IRB regulations.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using what Lincoln and Guba (1985) called the "constant comparative technique" (as cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 117). First, I examined the data and transcripts and assigned categories to the raw data. Gorman and Clayton (2005) suggested repeating the process three times because "with each reading new insights, patterns and connections will emerge" (pp. 209-210). The technique of data reduction allowed me to come up with preliminary patterns and categories (p. 207). Similarly, Silverman (2001) stated that it makes sense to begin with a small chunk of data to classify the first categories. This technique can be repeated to expand the data corpus (p. 239). Then, I subscribed different definitions to the categories and reread them in order to refine the existing categories. As a third step, I examined the categories to look for common themes or patterns (Lincoln & Guba 1985, as cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 117). As a fourth and final step, I tested to see whether the categories actually corresponded to the research questions posed in the previous chapter (p. 117). Review of patterns emerging from the constant comparative technique served to address the research questions of this study.

### **3.5. Limitations of the Method**

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) listed a few limitations that qualitative research methods pose such as that the sample size may be too small; hence, the study will have to be considered preliminary research to a larger research project. Secondly, loss of objectivity is also a component of this type of research because of the close proximity of the researcher to the participants. Third, if the research is not planned carefully, the researcher might lose time focusing on irrelevant points (p. 49-50). Furthermore, Gorman and Clayton (2005) cited Guba as saying that in qualitative research one should speak of credibility rather than validity, and because objectivity or neutrality is impossible, the researcher should aim for confirmability (p. 26). Moreover, Bryman (1988) stated that interview transcripts and short conversations provide only proof for an argument rather than addressing the “representativeness” or “generality” of the study (as cited in Silverman, 2002, p. 34).

### **3.6. Summary of the Methodology**

This chapter has explained the methods used in this qualitative study. I travelled to Erbil and Suleymaniyah in Kurdistan to conduct 14 in-depth one-on-one interviews with independent as well as pro-government professionals. Additionally, the member of the KJS and a staff member of the Dutch NGO IMCK were interviewed. Then, I used the constant comparative technique to analyze the raw data. The next chapter presents the results obtained with those methods.



## **Results**

This section gives a detailed description of the findings resulting from data collection in Erbil and Suleymaniyah, Kurdistan. This chapter is organized according to the four specific research questions mentioned in Chapter 2. First, it discusses the reasons participants offered for government-media tensions. The next section lists the structural and practical problems for journalism in Kurdistan. Third, it explains to what extent political parties control the judicial system and professional unions and what implications this control has on the media environment. The last section describes the impact of favoritism and bribery on journalism in Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **4.1. Research Question 1a**

RQ 1a asked: What are the red line topics that trigger government-media conflicts?

The red line topics that trigger government-media conflicts are usually socio-cultural topics as well as topics undermining Iraqi Kurdistan's "national security." Derived from the participant interviews, these red line topics can be divided into two groups: First, critique of corruption in the government and among ruling officials and their family members. Second group of red line topics comprises matters perceived to undermine Kurdistan's cultural and traditional values, which are defined by the ruling regime.

The first sub-section lists, as mentioned by participants, the cultural boundaries which prevent active journalists from investigating red line topics. These topics are religion, sexual mores, women-related issues, corruption, and the lives of the ruling officials and their families. Furthermore, participants added that when crossing these red lines, journalists put themselves in line of danger because most officials in the political parties still have the peshmerga/fighter mentality: they resort to violence when faced with a problem. This constructed fear of retaliation

attacks leads many journalists to use self-censorship when writing about sensitive issues. Moreover, the majority of participants agreed that the ruling regime exerted censorship on newspapers under the auspices of protecting “national security.” Furthermore, it is in the KRG’s interest to construct a positive image of Kurdistan for the outside world. To achieve this aim, a “gentleman’s agreement” prevents journalists to write negatively about Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Socio-cultural factors for red line topics.** The first group of red line topics is Kurdistan’s socio-cultural and traditional values which derive from a tribal and conservative structure of society. In this context the ruling officials and their families do not allow media professionals to criticize them for being corrupt. According to the majority of participants, tribalism is still very prevalent in Kurdistan; the Kurdish society is very conservative, and cultural boundaries still exist. One participant said that although Kurdish society is more liberal than many Middle Eastern societies, it is still very restrictive. All participants in this study have confirmed that part of the reason for the ongoing tension between the ruling political parties and media professionals is the tribal approach the ruling government exercises to run the country. A staff member of an international NGO revealed that whereas everywhere else it is normal to report on issues regarding the ruling political officials and their families, in Kurdistan it is a taboo and a dangerous line to cross. The editor-in-chief of an independent magazine in Suleymaniyah described his sentiments about the media conditions in Kurdistan as “the way authorities rule here is still just like when they were in the mountains.” Another editor-in-chief of a magazine which was originally funded by a political official stated that though tribal politics has no room in today’s contemporary world, it still exists in Kurdistan. The main opinion of the participants is that because tribalism influences the rule of political officials, red line topics are considered a crime against society.

Journalists writing on these topics have to, according to the participants, expect murder threats, beatings, kidnappings, arrests, and possible court trials. Often these threats are not only empty threats as in the cases of Serdast Osman (killed in May 2010) and Soran Mama Hama (killed in July 2008). Almost all participants attributed the deaths of these journalists to one of the ruling parties or an official in one of the ruling parties. Serdast Osman wrote a satirical article about the Kurdistan leader Massoud Barzani; Soran Mama Hama published an article in the independent magazine *Lvin* about a prostitution ring in Kirkuk involving police and security officials. According to some participants, those murders are still unresolved, which is highly unusual considering the tight security measures in Kurdistan. A freelancer and political analyst added that after he criticized the rule of Massoud Barzani during an interview on Goran TV, his car was burned down. Shortly before the incident, he had received many phone calls disapproving his critical statements about the KRG ruler. He continued that after the incident a prominent political leader bought him a new car with the warning not to criticize Massoud Barzani again because Barzani did not like it. At other times, journalists discontinued a report because they were threatened. Other tactics to scare off media professionals from doing their work include playing with their psyche. People called them and informed them that political officials know everything about their families, offering details such as “your mother works like this, and your father works in this institution,” according to an independent participant.

Participants have associated this phenomenon with political officials’ inexperience as political actors. According to most informants, most political officials in the government resort to violence when faced with problems. Independent informants added that since officials are still new to the posts they are holding and have no experience in politics, they see anyone writing against them as enemies or as conspirators with foreign enemy states. According to a journalist

and political analyst, instead of suing journalists, “[officials] want to make [them] silent, and the best way to make journalists silent is to torture [them], to punish [them], to murder [them], and silence [them] forever.” Another journalist working for an independent newspaper stated that many of the officials holding a position in the KRG were part of the peshmergas/fighters during the civil war and were still affected by their role in the war; hence, they react with extreme violence when journalists write critically about them or their ruling methods. Furthermore, many of the participants have indicated that the Assayish, the internal security services of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), do not know how to deal with the media; they see journalists as part of the events taking place, rather than objective observers. As a result, the media fears the Assayish because crimes against journalists are usually committed by them, according to most participants.

**National security used as reason for censorship and self-censorship.** As a consequence of the constructed conservative image of Kurdistan by the ruling regime to maintain their ruling position, “national security” is used as a pretext to exert censorship on newspaper content, according to participants. Journalists in independent newspapers and partly state-run papers said that the term “national security” is usually used as an excuse to keep journalists from performing their duty as watchdogs of Kurdish society. An independent journalist who used to freelance for one of the independent publications said that when he wrote a critical story about corruption in the government, he received phone calls warning him that what he was doing was harming Kurdistan. Most independent journalists said that reporting is restricted because anything that could be perceived as benefitting the enemy state is forbidden from being published. In addition, the editor of a party-owned/funded paper in Suleymaniyah highlighted the suspicious attitude towards foreign funds by stating, “No one knows what the financial aid

[from international NGOs], or support for the media [is for]; whether it's for the development of democracy, or the states which are against Kurdistan." Another editor of a major independent newspaper stated that even though he believes every journalist should keep "national security" in mind when reporting, the ruling parties use it as a pretext to control journalists' access to information. He continued that he "believes in responsible media"; if publishing sensitive information would jeopardize a case, his publication waits until the case is solved before publishing this information. Furthermore, the same editor said that censorship was part of his daily routine. In his 11-year career as a journalist, his constant requests to interview Talabani and Barzani were consistently denied.

Moreover, the press is used by political officials to construct a positive image of Iraqi Kurdistan. The editor of a news agency funded by a prominent politician revealed that for the sake of "national security" and the Kurdish cause, he and his staff gave everyone free access to the news agency's news reports. He added that Kurdistan is struggling for Kirkuk, so if for example, they have positive news about the Kirkuk conflict, they want everyone to have access to it. Similarly, a journalist working for a party-funded print publication targeting English speaking expatriates revealed that officials asked him to publish stories shedding positive light on Kurdistan and its ruling government because their aim is to "reduce the bad image [of Kurdistan] and . . . make the good image larger. . . ." He elaborated that because Kurdistan is a politically unstable country, his paper should not publish articles that the enemy could benefit from, and concluded that the word he hears most as a journalist is "national security."

This overly used term "national security" leads to an indirect form of censorship. A staff member of an international NGO believed there was no direct but indirect censorship in Kurdistan; journalists are threatened by the security forces of the political parties and even by

political officials themselves. The editor of a party-owned daily, on the other hand, said, “We don’t have censorship, but we have a gentleman’s agreement with our party.” According to this agreement, the paper does not write negatively about subjects such as neighboring countries, religion, women, Kurdish people in Europe or in the US because they are their comrades. Then he accuses the independent media not to follow the abovementioned “gentleman’s agreement.”

A further aspect in the context of censorship is that media professionals still apply self-censorship when covering red line topics such as corruption, sexual issues, women-related issues, rulers and their family members, and religion. A staff member of an international NGO highlighted the difficulties independent journalists and journalists working for government-owned/funded media outlets face. Pro-government journalists only report on issues that the ruling party allows them to, unlike independent journalists who tend to be more careful regarding red line topics. All independent media participants said that they self-censored because of fear of retaliation attacks by political parties. Two of them, however, indicated if they had the supporting documents, they would not hesitate to publish an article about a red line topic. One of them proudly revealed that the *Christian Science Monitor* had stated that his magazine “wrote articles with its blood.” In contrast, except for one, all media professionals in government-owned/funded media outlets claimed they did not self-censor but were careful when they wrote about topics such as religion, women- or children-related topics.

The results presented above showed that political officials, their security forces (Assayish), or the police use violence against journalists when they report on red line topics such as corruption, religion, sexual mores, women-related issues, and rulers and their families. Moreover, according to all the participants, tribalism is still part of Kurdish society and influences leaders in their rule. Furthermore, the KRG uses the term “national security” to exert

ensorship on the independent print press by emphasizing the importance of Kurdistan’s “national security.” In addition, fear of retaliation attacks leads to journalists using self-censorship to circumvent these retaliation attacks. According to the participants, it is in the KRG’s interest to uphold a positive image of Kurdistan by pressuring journalists not to write negatively about Kurdistan. A government-owned/funded paper even has a “gentleman’s agreement” not to undermine Kurdistan’s positive image.

#### **4.2. Research Question 1b**

RQ 1b asked the following: What are the structural and practical problems for journalism in Iraqi Kurdistan?

The first sub-section of this section discusses Iraqi Kurdish journalists’ lack of professionalism. All participants agreed that Kurdistan’s media professionals are unprofessional; because they do not double check stories, rely on false information, and change information obtained from interviews with officials. They also stated a lack of academic background as reason for this phenomenon. In the second sub-section, data supported that Kurdistan has no “freedom of information act” in its constitution and that 70 percent of information was obtained from contacts in lower positions in ministries. However, according to a pro-government editor, journalists do not put an effort into researching stories. He added that independent journalists lie, print false information, and change what officials say in interviews. The third sub-section offers a discussion about the confusion of the status of independent papers because government-owned/funded papers claim that independent media outlets are also funded by parties, namely the opposition. Furthermore, according to all participants there is lack of transparency in Kurdistan.

**Journalists show lack of professionalism.** Independent as well as party-owned/funded media outlets, have suggested that most journalists in Kurdistan are inexperienced, unprofessional, and immature, and this in fact leads to reckless reporting. The result is many flawed reports, with wrong information published that has detrimental consequences. Independent media professionals, however, claimed that political officials are partly to blame for this phenomenon because they withhold information from them.

Furthermore, almost all participants indicated that part of the reason for the lack of professionalism is the non-existent academic background journalists have in Kurdistan. One participant said sarcastically, “Illiterate people can start a newspaper.” A member of the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS) contended that Kurdistan’s professional journalists were either in prison or hiding in the mountains, which had an adverse effect on the structure of journalism in Kurdistan. He added that out of the 5000 members that they have, he believed only 500 to be professional. They all gave different reasons for the phenomenon, however. Two independent participants said that journalists did not have the necessary academic background; universities do not offer enough courses or workshops. Another independent journalist estimated that 70 percent of journalists did not attend any university courses at all. Also, all participants agreed that the universities offering a degree were of low quality. One independent participant said that journalism in Kurdistan was still in its primal stage. In addition, an independent freelancer and political analyst said that the lack of academic background was a disaster and that 99 percent of journalists lacked the principles of journalism.

The standard for professional journalism is not the same in Kurdistan as in other countries. The editor-in-chief of a party owned paper said that what may seem professional journalism to him may not be so for a foreign observer. Then he criticized independent



journalists' professionalism by saying that they did not know whether they are working for a paper like the *New York Times* or *The Sun*. Another editor added that "some people have become icons of journalism, but if they go outside of this region, they will not be even given space in the yellow pages [tabloids]."

**Lack of transparency and journalists' reckless reporting tactics.** All participating media professionals have stated that one of the principal problems journalists face in Kurdistan is obtaining information for news reports. They all stated that Kurdistan does not have a "freedom of information act," which allows access to documents from government institutions. Three of them said it was very difficult to get access to documents or government institutions. To interview anyone, one has to go to the respective ministries first to ask for permission; for example, to get access to a school or a hospital, a journalist has to first get permission from the ministry of education or health.

Another principal problem in Kurdistan is obtaining accurate information for reports. Every participating independent media professional stated that they have to rely on information received from civil servants in the lower positions in the ministries, but that these employees only talked anonymously. One participant mentioned that these employees would even have him/her sign a contract to keep their names anonymous in case of a court trial or retaliation attacks. Some have estimated that 70 percent of the information they obtain is through these contacts, and because political officials refuse to give them interviews, it is difficult to verify received information. For example, some participants said their government is secretly selling oil to its neighbor Iran but that no one can write about it in the press. A staff member of an international NGO confirmed this by offering that during one of the workshops a journalist working for a party-owned/funded paper said that he was not allowed to touch the topic.

Another independent participant offered another example; the general director of a ministry had committed “age fraud.” When he had reached the cut-off age, he changed his birth date in order to seem younger and stay in his position. When the journalist tried to uncover the fraud, he was threatened to be taken to court.

Some participants, however, attributed the inability to obtain accurate information to journalists’ unprofessionalism. The editor of an independent paper disclosed that nothing is impossible, but that unfortunately, many of his colleagues are too idle to do the extra work and double check information. Whereas the independent media outlets claimed that government institutions intentionally withhold information from them, a media professional in a party-owned/funded media outlet attributed this phenomenon to the inability of politicians to produce statistics or data because they used to be peshmergas/fighters, and not because officials wanted to withhold information from journalists. The problem is not the policy of the KRG, he continued, but that journalists lie, print false information, and change what Kurdish officials say in interviews.

Others have attributed the problem to the inexperience of security forces. The editor of a popular magazine said that part of the problem is also the inexperience of the security forces who do not know how to deal with the press. A staff member of an international NGO confirmed the above and added that the NGO the member works for offered workshops for journalists, political officials, and their security forces to educate them on the profession of journalism. Another editor of a magazine in Suleymaniyah stated that independent journalists believe they have the power to do anything they want. So when a journalist slips into the role of an activist he loses his role as a journalist, which leads to the bad relationship they have today, according to him. Journalists often see themselves as part of the system, playing the role of “surrogate politicians,”

according to a staff member of an international NGO. The member further explained that the reason journalists have no access to information is because they are perceived as the enemy by government officials. The member elaborated that even the courts are an indirect way of censorship, indicating that Kurdistan is completely politicized.

**Financial dependence and political affiliation of media outlets.** Newspaper funding and political affiliation of media outlets play a big role in Iraqi Kurdistan. All but one independent media professional said that they fund their papers with newspaper sales, ad space sales, and international NGO funds. The editor of an independent media outlet, pointing at several party-owned papers, complained that these papers were financed by the KRG budget but were of bad quality. The same editor continued that it was not fair that the KRG offered financial aid only to certain papers; he added that *Rudaw* paper, which claims to be independent and is backed by Nechirwan Barzani, receives 106 million dollars per month. Another independent journalist reinforced this statement by stating that *Hawler* paper, for example, is distributed free of charge because it is financed by the KRG. However, these claims could not be confirmed by other participants.

Some participants agreed that even independent papers are backed by political parties. An independent freelancer and political analyst, however, declared that even the so-called independent papers are not fully independent. He continued by saying that while they are independent in the beginning, after six or eight months they come to support a party, whether it is the opposition or a ruling party. Hence, they receive funding from the respective parties. He confessed that this is the procedure for all papers in Kurdistan. A member of an international NGO reinforced the notion saying that some of the independent papers are close to the Goran movement, the opposition but did not indicate whether they received funding from the

opposition. The member also indicated that journalists working for government-owned/funded papers earned a good salary while independent journalists had to have two jobs to survive. This in fact was confirmed by almost all independent journalists.

In contrast, all but two media professionals working for government-owned/funded papers said their papers were funded by a political party. Further funding comes from newspaper sales and ad space sales. The other two said they were solely funded by sale of ad space, sale of newspaper copies, and international NGOs. One of them stated though, that newspapers “lied” about the number of copies they sold. The editor of a party-owned/funded paper noted that there is a competition between the party-owned/funded and independent print publications, but that this competition is “not a professional competition, it’s a political competition . . . we [party papers] are financially married to the party, but they [independent papers] are not . . . they are the secret girlfriends of the opposition parties.”

The above section has shown that according to participants, there is still great unprofessionalism among journalists in Kurdistan, which was blamed on the lack of an academic background. Furthermore, the great majority of participants believe that there is no transparency in Iraqi Kurdistan. Since there is no “freedom of information act” and because political officials refuse to give journalists interviews, it is difficult to verify information. According to the participants, 70 percent of information is obtained from contacts in lower positions in the ministries. Moreover, one editor claimed that independent journalists tended to print false information, lied, and changed what political officials said in interviews. While all independent journalists claimed they were self-sufficient, party-paper journalists claimed independent papers were financially backed by the opposition parties.

### 4.3. Research Question 1c

RQ 1c asked: To what extent do political parties control the judicial system and professional unions, and what implications does their control have for the media environment of Kurdistan?

The first sub-section of this section offers a discussion on the political aspect of courts. Most participants claimed that local courts are mostly run by members of the ruling political parties, making it difficult for journalists to expect a fair trial. According to some participants, courts applied justice to political officials rather than a regular person. In the second sub-section, according to most participants, the new media law, passed in September 2008, is still not implemented in most of the courts in the region, giving them the opportunity to revisit the 1969 Ba'th Penal Code when trying media professionals. Moreover, they claimed that the new law does not contain any precedent cases in which to refer. In addition, the new media law only covers the print press; there is no mention of the new media in its articles. Finally, the third sub-section discusses the role the KJS plays in Kurdistan. The KJS, which was initially two syndicates, the KDP and the PUK, was eventually merged in 1998, is also dominated by members of the ruling parties. Hence, it is not equipped to provide protection to media professionals, since they do not wish to go against the wishes of the political parties.

**Courts run by members of political parties.** The courts in Kurdistan have been described by the independent media professionals as not independent; rather, they are political. Accordingly, independent media professionals facing trials have often lost their cases against political parties or government institutions suing independent media professionals for critical articles they described as defamation. The editor of a party-owned/funded media outlet shared

his concerns and distrust of the courts, revealing that when high ranking officials are affiliated with a crime, nothing is done by the courts. When, on the other hand, a layperson is involved, the courts act immediately. He offered the case of Serdast Osman; years after the murder, no one has been arrested yet, though the tight security measures in Kurdistan should have allowed the appropriate channels to catch the criminals. The editor of a popular independent media outlet confirmed this argument by saying that “there is nothing called rule of law”; laws are only applied to ordinary people but not to high-ranking politicians.

For that reason independent journalists do not trust the courts. A staff member of an international NGO explained that it is not surprising that journalists do not trust the courts because often judges are party members; hence, they are not fair when trying independent journalists. The editor-in-chief of a party-owned/funded Kurdish news agency, however, explained that Kurdish courts indeed practiced the new media law. In addition, two editors-in-chief of a party-owned/funded daily and a magazine in Suleymaniyah said to be funded by a political official, said that the courts are independent because the media professionals had been sued before and had lost against their opponents. Most judges are supporters of the political parties and could easily reverse a verdict against a guilty person if it was in the parties’ interests, according to one participant. Another independent journalist confessed that his trust in the courts was very thin; because the print publication he works for was sued for a translated article by Michael Robin about corruption in the government institutions, and was sentenced to pay a large fine exceeding the amount set forth in the new media law. In addition, the owner and editor-in-chief of a political paper in Erbil said to be funded by a political official confessed that he used to distrust the courts. He explained, however, he could detect gradual change; while the courts were corrupt and very rigid before, there is more room for improvements now.

**New media law not implemented.** Though Iraqi Kurdistan has a new media law, it is not implemented. All participants working for independent media outlets agreed that the new media law passed by parliament in 2008 was a positive step towards more freedom of the print press, but the problem is that (a) the new media law is still not implemented as judges either revisit the 1969 Ba’th Penal Code, or sentence media professionals or the papers to a fine exceeding the amount set forth in the new law; (b) the new media law only covers the print press; there is no mention of the new media, and (c) according to the editor of an independent media outlet the new media law is too flexible and has many loopholes such as undefined words like “general rule”, “tradition,” and “national security.” In addition, the law does not provide any precedent cases.

Unlike many of the pro-government participants’ claims, journalists are still tried under the old 1969 Ba’th Penal Code, according to all independent journalists. Nonetheless, the member of an international NGO preferred for the new law to stay in place for now because attempts at changing this law could backfire, since the government officials’ sentiment is that they have already given journalists more freedom than they should have. One journalist working for an English party-owned/funded paper, however, said that this law was not sufficient because it did not cover the entire media spectrum. The owner and editor-in-chief of a political paper in Erbil said to be funded by a political official confessed that while the law was enough to protect journalists, it was not enough to obtain information. Media professionals working for government-owned/funded papers, including a member of the KJS, mostly agreed that the new media law was in fact implemented, was adequate enough to protect the rights of journalists, and did not need to be modified.

**Political parties' control of the Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate (KJS).** Many journalists do not trust the KJS. The KJS, as most participants indicated, is run by members of the ruling political parties. One participant said that the selection for high ranking positions resembles political elections; the head of the KJS has to be a member of the KDP; the position for the Vice President is reserved for a PUK member; and the secretary has to be an Islamic Union member. Another editor of a political newspaper said to be funded by a political official confirmed that the syndicate was political because it was represented by political parties that work there. A staff member of an international NGO stated, because the syndicate is part of the political system in Kurdistan, it cannot play the role an ordinary journalists' syndicate would in any other country. This was reinforced by the editor of a magazine in Suleymaniyah by confessing that he had no faith in the syndicate because it refused cooperation when he needed its assistance. He further added that he believes every political party in the region wants to control this syndicate in order to control journalists. Another editor-in-chief of a weekly newspaper shared that the syndicate was a political organ to control the journalists in the region because despite the daily attacks on journalists during the demonstrations in April 2011 in Suleymaniyah, during which journalists were injured, killed, and their equipment confiscated, the syndicate did not do anything because it would be against the interests of the ruling regime. Three other journalists working for independent media outlets confirmed this sentiment; one confessed that the syndicate did not even make it into the committee that investigated the murder of Serdast Osman.

Most journalists believe that the KJS is not equipped to protect them. A freelance journalist and political analyst confessed that the syndicate was not an independent organ, but rather an organization that had only the interests of the PUK and the KDP at heart; hence, this



syndicate could not provide journalists with protection and security. Rather the KJS worked against journalists, according to the editor-in-chief of a popular independent magazine. Another party-owned/funded newspaper's editor, however, added that the solution to the problem is not to refuse to become a member in this union but to possibly create another syndicate. The editor-in-chief of an independent weekly agreed that while the syndicate was adequate during the civil war, it was time for a new syndicate because the current syndicate is political and had not changed its staff members (KDP and PUK) in 10 years. A member of the KJS, however, claimed that the syndicate is independent and open to all those media professionals fulfilling the criteria required for becoming a member in the syndicate. None of the participants in this study were members of the KJS because they did not believe the syndicate could in any way protect them from attacks, threats, beatings, or even court trials.

This section showed that according to most participants, the judicial system and organizations such as the KJS were completely politicized. The courts are distrusted by members of the independent print press, and hence, could not expect a fair trial. However, the majority of the party-paper journalists claimed that the courts were in fact independent. In addition, the new media law is not implemented. The courts resort to the 1969 Ba'th Penal Code when sentencing journalists. Furthermore, the KJS was also distrusted by all participants because it is mainly run by political party members. Even the selection for high ranking positions resembles political elections, according to one participant. This means that the KJS cannot protect journalists, which is essentially its function.

#### 4.4. Research Question 1d

RQ 1d asked: To what extent does favoritism and bribery have an influence on journalism in Kurdistan?

In this section of the results, collected data corroborated that journalists' belief of favoritism and bribery is prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan. Journalists loyal to the ruling parties receive gifts as rewards such as plots of land, cars, good salaries, and even gold for their wives.

**Media environment shows signs of favoritism and bribery.** All independent participants agreed that journalists receive rewards for supporting political parties. One went as far as saying that even the wives of journalists receive gold as gifts.<sup>1</sup> The editor of a popular weekly newspaper in Suleymaniyah said, "Whatever you are, if you are willing to defend parties all the time for whatever they do, you will be rewarded. You will occupy positions that you don't deserve. That's the way of parties to control the society." A staff member of an international NGO confirmed that this practice was particularly visible during the 2010 elections when the KJS received plots of land and assigned the journalists' association with the distribution of the plots of land among journalists. The member added that this influenced journalists' coverage of events. The editor-in-chief of an independent magazine said, "If I want to be rich, one call, [and] one report. That's it." Another independent media professional elaborated that even foreign journalists received gifts, offering a journalist from *Sharq-al-Awsat* as an example.

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<sup>1</sup> Gold has an important meaning in Kurdish culture because it is seen as a form of security. After the wedding the newlyweds sell the gold they have received as a gift to start their lives together or they keep it and only sell in an emergency.

The editor of a Kurdish news agency confirmed that if journalists helped the PUK, they in fact receive gifts such as cars, salaries, and financial help for their paper. However, he justified it by saying that it was normal that the PUK would not help those who did not support them. Moreover, the editor-in-chief of a paper in Erbil said to be funded by a politician in a party blamed the existence of favoritism and bribery on the morale of journalists. He believed they asked the KRG or political parties for gifts, proudly adding that when the construction company Adel handed out envelopes with money in it during a conference, his staff had not taken it and never had taken a gift from anyone before. A media professional of a party-owned Kurdish daily, however, indicated that you cannot always make a distinction between good and evil and said that “There are also journalists in the opposition media that get rewarded with land and cars, and the party journalists also get rewarded.” He continued that he, for example, did not receive any rewards, though he works for a party-paper. Another media professional working for a party-owned/funded paper in Erbil said that he had heard about this practice in Kurdistan but added that his paper like many others praised the ruling parties but still did not get any rewards. One of the participants working for a magazine in Suleymaniyyah that is said to be funded by the current prime minister, however, rejected these claims altogether.

This section has shown that journalists’ belief of favoritism and bribery as being part of Kurdistan’s media environment is widespread. While all independent media professionals indicated that pro-government media employees receive rewards, party-journalists claimed that independent journalists receive gifts as well from the opposition parties. Another editor said that it was normal for a party to reward journalists if they helped their party. Data supported that giving and accepting of gifts seems to be a common practice and can be attributed to the political culture in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### **4.5. Summary of Results**

This chapter has explained the results collected during fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan. Participants suggested that some of the root factors for the tense relationship between the KRG and the independent media outlets are the prevalent tribal mentality, red line topics, the peshmerga/fighter mentality, and “national security” as a reason to censor news, and force journalists to use self-censorship. Furthermore, journalists are unprofessional because they lack an academic background. In addition, participants claimed that there is no transparency in Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, while pro-government media outlets received funds from political officials and the KRG, some pro-government media professionals said that independent media outlets also received funding from opposition groups such as the Goran movement.

While all participants agreed on journalists printing wrong information, they offered different reasons for the causes of this phenomenon. Journalists working for government-owned/funded papers claimed that independent journalists were unprofessional, immature and idle, while independent media professionals explained that this phenomenon exists because of: (a) lack of an academic background; (b) lack of data; (c) officials’ refusal to verify information; and (d) officials’ refusal to grant interviews.

The third section has shown that according to participants, the courts are not independent leading to unfair trials of journalists. Though, there is a new media law, courts resort to the former 1969 Penal Code. Equally important, the KJS is mostly run by political party members; hence, lacks the power to protect journalists when necessary. Furthermore, data substantiated that Kurdistan’s media infrastructure is mainly political because the KJS is run by political parties; courts are perceived as not independent and used for political parties’ aims.

Finally, the fourth section has shown that there is widespread belief among journalists that Iraqi Kurdistan's media environment shows signs of favoritism and bribery. Journalists receive gifts and rewards such as plots of land when showing loyalty to parties. The next chapter presents the discussion resulting from the analyzed data.

## **Discussion**

The final chapter of this thesis restates the research problem and reviews the major methods used in this study. The next two sections summarize the results, and relate them to the literature on media freedom in the Arab world. The fourth section discusses their implications. The last section states the limitations of this study and areas for further research.

### **5.1. Statement of the Problem, Review of the Methodology**

As explained in Chapter 1, the perceptions of Kurdish media professionals are the central idea of this study which can be seen in a broader context of media freedom in Iraqi Kurdistan. Though media professionals struggle with the issue of media freedom globally, it is especially prevalent in the Middle East. Repressive media laws and regulations, censorship and self-censorship, favoritism and bribery, and government-media tensions are all contributing factors for the lack of media freedom in Iraqi Kurdistan. In order to find out the perceptions of Kurdish media professionals, I interviewed independent as well as pro-government journalists from various media outlets in Kurdistan. In addition, I interviewed a staff member of the Kurdistan Journalist's Syndicate (KJS) and a staff member of an international NGO in Iraqi Kurdistan.

I used the “snowball sampling” method—in which initial contacts suggest further people for the researcher to approach, who in turn may provide further contacts—to choose one-on-one interviews with 14 media professionals in Erbil and Suleymaniyah, Kurdistan. To ensure objective results, I chose participants working for party-owned/funded print papers, independent media outlets, a member of the KJS, and a member of an international NGO in Kurdistan. I traveled to Erbil and Suleymaniyah to conduct the interviews in person in the vicinity of the

respective media outlets. When the information flow showed redundancy, I stopped the interview process and was ready to analyze the data using the constant comparative technique.

## **5.2. Summary of Results**

Results showed a strained relationship between the independent print media and the governing body in Kurdistan. Findings revealed more about journalists' perceptions of the reasons for this phenomenon; first, journalists seem to live in a media environment where they cannot report without interference from political officials on daily events and red line topics such as tribalism, women-related issues, religion, sexual mores, corruption, and rulers and their families because of possible retaliation attacks. Second, the term "national security" is used as a pretext to censor news content and coerce independent journalists to self-censor. In addition, pro-government journalists indicated that it is important for political officials to portray a positive image of Kurdistan and avoid harmful articles shedding negative light on Kurdistan. Third, every participant agreed that the majority of Kurdish journalists show a lack of professionalism. While independent journalists said that this is due to the lack of academic background and inexperience, pro-government journalists claimed that independent journalists lie and are too idle to double-check information.

Moreover, Kurdistan lacks a transparent media environment. Some independent journalists agreed that they get 70 percent of information "sous la table" (under the table) because political officials do not grant interviews to independent journalists. Also, media outlets that were affiliated with a political party seem to have better funding than independent papers that relied only on newspaper sales. Media professionals also indicated that Kurdistan's media environment is completely politicized, a fact which has adverse implications for the independent

media outlets. Though there is a new media law, journalists complained that they are still tried under the 1969 Ba'th Penal Code under which they face jail sentences when charged with an offense. Also, the KJS is run by members of political parties; hence, it is not equipped to protect journalists. Rather, it only protects political officials' wishes, according to all participants. In addition, they complained about the widespread practice of favoritism and bribery in Kurdistan, involving not only journalists but various other professionals loyal to the KRG. Journalists receive "gifts" such as cars, gold for their wives, plots of land, and high salaries.

### **5.3. Relationship of Study to Past Research**

**Censorship, self-censorship, and political-mouthpieces.** The results of this study coincide with the literature on the repressed print press in the Middle East. Despite the different socio-political changes the individual countries underwent, they all had similar taboo topics that were off limits for the press (Ayalon, 1995; Amin, 2001; Bengio, 1998; Hafez, 2001; Mellor, 2005). In accordance with the literature on the Arab media, there were four main topics giving reason for censorship in Kurdistan: "political debate," "criticism of country's rulers or their families," "writing of a religious nature," and "social and sexual mores" (Alterman, 1998, pp. 45-47). As Sherry Ricciardi (2011) said, when reported on, journalists face severe punishments or retaliation attacks. Two journalists' criticism of the KRG rulers ended fatally. Although there is no official proof that the journalists Soran Mama Hama and Serdast Osman were murdered by one of the ruling parties, most participants indicated that they believed this to be the case. By doing so, they confirmed what Fandy (2007) called "the ultimate form of censorship" (p. 5). In accordance with the US Human Rights Report (2009) and Hama-Saeed (2010), the majority of participants said they circumvented critical issues to avoid retaliation attacks by the government.



In addition, the results of the study confirmed past literature on direct and indirect control of the media outlets in Iraqi Kurdistan. The ruling political officials channel funds to the media outlets for their existence or channel media professionals loyal to the ruling political parties into these media outlets to control the content of the papers (Abdulrahman, 2007; Ayalon, 1995; Bengio, 1998; Fandy, 2007). One of the independent participants, for example, said that *Rudaw* paper received 106 million dollars per month to maintain the paper and another pro-government media professional revealed that it was normal that the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) only helped those who helped their party.

The results of this study support what could be referred to as prevalent favoritism and bribery in the Arab world in Ayalon's (1995), Bengio's (1998), and Fandy's (2007) studies; the press is rewarded generously with materialistic gifts when writing favorable reports about the ruling regime or the ruling political parties. The majority of participants in this study explained that journalists, their wives, and other people loyal to the regime receive gifts from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), or someone in a powerful political party. Gifts include mainly plots of land, promotions, cars, or gold for the journalists' wives. A member of an international NGO remembered that the KJS received plots of land and assigned the distribution of these plots to the Journalist's Association.

Rugh's (2004) typology of a diverse press in Iraqi Kurdistan seems to be outdated. As Hafez (2001) indicated, some countries are in dire need of reassessment of Rugh's four typologies. Iraqi Kurdistan is one of these countries because it is going through a transitional state. Rugh published his study in 2004 shortly after the fall of Saddam in 2003. The one-year gap between 2003 and 2004 seems too short a time to give a thorough analysis of Kurdistan's media environment.

**Media is political.** The findings of this study also coincide with Rugh's (2004), Ayish's (2001), Hurrat and Leidig's (1996), and Fandy's (2007) claim that the Arab media is political in nature. Most media outlets in Iraqi Kurdistan are owned or funded by a political party. Hence, they only publish articles in favor of the political parties or the KRG and circumvent reporting about negative events. Drawing a positive image of Kurdistan and the KRG is in the political parties' interest. Participants working for party-owned/funded media outlets indicated that "national security" and the image of Kurdistan were of great importance when reporting. Fandy (2007) underpinned this theory, claiming that even independent media outlets were not necessarily independent. Weaver (1990) was possibly right when he said that leaders in the Middle East contend that "press freedom endangers national security and the welfare of the state" (p. 115) because all independent as well pro-government participants agreed that political officials always remind media professionals that certain topics jeopardize Kurdistan's "national security" and distort its image.

Likewise, Kurdish courts have been described by almost all participants, except for a few pro-government media professionals, as a non-independent organ of the state with most of the judges being political party members. This confirms Hama-Saeed's (2010) and the US Human Rights Report's (2009) claim that Kurdish independent journalists could not expect a fair trial in Kurdish courts. Most informants further confirmed that instead of using the new media law passed in 2008, courts, when sentencing journalists, still apply the former 1969 Ba'th Penal Code under which journalists can be sentenced to a jail term, or a fine higher than the one set forth in the new law. One independent participant said that his newspaper had been sued for a publication of a translated article written by Michael Robin. The courts sentenced his paper to pay a fine of 30 million Iraqi dinar, but the set fine in the new media law is "not less than

(1,000,000) million dinars [855.07 dollars] and not more than (2,000,000) million dinars [1,710.13 dollars]” (The Law of Journalism in Kurdistan, 2009, p. 10). In addition, the KJS is run by members of the ruling political parties, as most participants revealed.

#### **5.4. Interpretation and Application of the Results**

As some of the participants stated, there is incomprehension between the ruling political parties and independent journalists. This may be due to the actors’ different political goals and aims. The government-media relationship in Kurdistan is a dysfunctional one. Opinions and viewpoints differ depending on whether independent journalists or journalists working for government-owned/funded media outlets were interviewed. The findings suggested that because Kurdistan’s independent media and the KRG have a dysfunctional relationship; both parties aspire for different goals. Political officials seem to consider the independent media as the enemy intent on damaging “national security” and distorting the image of Kurdistan, rather than as an institution holding an observer’s role. On the other hand, political officials use their media outlets to spread their values and views. Because politicians mainly consist of former peshmergas/fighters, they lack the experience to deal with the press professionally. In contrast, journalists are not professional due to a lack of academic background and lack of professional practice. According to the results, journalists seem to distrust the political parties deeply. It is striking how participants in their definitions of tribalism, media freedom, favoritism and bribery, and taboo topics, appropriated western constructions of these terms. While independent media outlets were in favor of the western constructions of these terms, journalists working for government-owned/funded media outlets depicted a different picture on the ground; they mostly favored political parties’ values and views.

The term tribalism was often used by participants during the individual interviews. Tribalism in the Kurdish context is important because it is essential to form unity and national awareness among Kurds. Furthermore, tribalism does not necessarily have to be bad or wrong. It could be seen as an important function in the transitional process Kurdistan is undergoing. Independent journalists, however, may consider it to be a problem because tribalism is used as a tool to control journalists by setting certain societal values and norms. That is why their definition of media freedom clashes with pro-government journalists' definitions. As in neighboring countries in the Middle East, the KRG's definition of the purpose of the media is completely distorted. Media outlets are seen as government tools to attain political aims or to enhance Kurdistan's positive image. Whereas participants working for party-owned/funded media outlets gave vague responses to red line topics such as tribalism, corruption, religion, sexual mores, women-related issues, and rulers and their families, independent journalists leaned towards a bleaker picture of media freedom. One pro-government participant said jokingly: "We have no problems with security forces because we are a government-owned paper, but if the opposition wins we'll be arrested too." This shows the confidence with which pro-government media officials can exercise their profession while independent journalists have to worry about possible retaliation attacks by the government.

The current media environment in Kurdistan is still very restricted and repressed. Rugh's (2004) depiction of a diverse media scene in Kurdistan is far from the case today because most of the media outlets active in Kurdistan serve as political mouthpieces. The government attempts at creating a freer media environment are only minimal. As indicated by most independent participants, the new media law passed in 2008 is not implemented and does not cover the new media (broadcast, TV, internet, and social media). This law is only a meager

attempt to convince journalists that the government cares about the tense situation between independent journalists and political officials. However, a staff member of an international NGO may have been right when confessing that it would be wiser to leave the law in place for now, for the KRG's sentiment is that those journalists already enjoy more freedom than they should. This seems to be understandable because there are numerous cases in which journalists, who may be frustrated with the situation in Kurdistan, attack political officials.

On 3 October 2011, Judith Neurink (2011) provoked a debate between journalists and political officials with the title "Journalists lie." She stated that journalists seem to think they are part of politics, which according to her is wrong. She may be right when blaming both sides—journalists and political officials—for the tense situation. Pro-government journalists indicated that independent journalists become part of the events on the ground. During fieldwork, the editors-in-chief of two independent papers held speeches during demonstrations in Sulemaniyah, hence becoming politically motivated actors in the events. Findings showed that KRG and independent journalists are very suspicious of each other. Perception is an important term in the context of Kurdistan. It is true that journalists are supposed to be neutral and show professionalism, but as in any other media environments, journalists are often political actors. A NGO staff member may have been right when saying that journalists are "surrogate politicians." This, however, is not necessarily wrong because media professionals in other countries usually endorse a political side as well; newspapers and magazines are usually positioned in the political spectrum. There needs to be a balance between the work of a journalist and his civil duty as a citizen to demonstrate or endorse a political side. If this is the case outside of Kurdistan, then why not in Kurdistan?

On the other hand, the ruling regime coerces a national obligation on the journalists to uphold “national security” rather than to criticize the ruling regime. Journalists feel obliged to self-censor not merely to circumvent retaliation attacks by the government but also to not be considered unpatriotic by their fellow Kurdish citizens. The question is, whether Kurdistan’s “national security” is really at stake, or are independent journalists right when they say that “national security” is only used as a pretext to censor news content? It seems legitimate to want to evoke national patriotism in their citizens—after all, Kurdistan is going through a transitional stage; trying to gain independence and struggling for the annexation of the oil-rich Kirkuk. However, the KRG/political parties are going too far because by repressing the media they muzzle the media’s voice to report critically about the events in Kurdistan. While both sides are right to a certain degree, the fundamental issue is that journalists and political officials need to work on achieving a mutual understanding about each other’s role in Kurdish society. Journalists need to be better trained to avoid unprofessionalism and political officials need to understand that it is the media’s role to be critical of its government.

Dajani said that the Lebanese media do not lack freedom but rather the proper professional and ethical structures (Dajani, 2002). Furthermore, he stated that the problem is not censorship or lack of freedom but the wrong visualization of media freedom. Journalists emphasized their private interests rather than their social responsibility. Most importantly, he claimed that the lack of academic background and training block professional growth of the Lebanese media. While he was making these statements regarding Lebanese media, I strongly believe there is a parallel between the Lebanese media and the Kurdish media. The Kurdish media’s growth has reached an impasse because of the lack of academic background and training of Kurdish journalists. The close to non-existing proper professional and ethical structures in

Kurdistan make way for a wrong assumption that Kurdistan's media outlets lack media freedom when the problem is more deeply rooted.

### **5.5. Limitations of the Study**

To make this study more accessible, I only focused on the print press as examining the entire media world in Iraqi Kurdistan would have been too vast for the size of an MA thesis. Furthermore, because the print press is the oldest form of media and there is no literature available on the media as a whole on Iraqi Kurdistan, I chose the print press as my MA thesis topic rather than delving into unknown fields such as the new media. In addition, due to financial and time constraints, I was only able to spend 10 days in Iraqi Kurdistan to do fieldwork. It is also important to note here that I only relied on interviews with media professionals. According to Bryman (1988), interviews and brief conversations only provide proof for an argument rather than the generality of the study (as cited in Silverman, 2002, p. 34), hence, this study will have to be seen as a preliminary study to a larger research project. In addition, the small size of participants acquired with the "snowball sampling" technique is also not representative of the generality of the study. These are the areas of limitation of this study. While the results of this study showed that there is a fundamental problem in Kurdistan between the ruling political parties and independent journalists, more research needs to be done to explore why this problem exists. Iraq as a whole should be studied in terms of the ruling regime's relationship with its media as well.

## **5.6. Areas for Further Research**

Because this research was only limited to media professionals, further research could take into consideration the opinions of government officials in the KRG. More research could be done on the freedom of the print press in Iraqi Kurdistan, for it is presumed that while the findings of this study can only be restricted to autonomous Iraqi-Kurdistan, they give an important and interesting indication of the restrictions or the level of the freedom of the print press in the rest of Iraq. Iraqi Kurdistan's media is an unexplored gold mine waiting to be researched and studied. It would be advised to do a comparative study of the independent print media in Kurdistan and their counterparts in the rest of Iraq.

Furthermore, the implications of new media such as social networks, broadcast, TV, and the internet, on the rule of the Kurdish government would make for an interesting study. Since this study mainly focused on the print media it is important to research these untapped fields. The study could look at the ownership of TV, print press, social networks, broadcast and examine whether they are affiliated with a political party or privately owned. It is also important to examine the rules and regulations in terms of establishing a media outlet in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Finally, a comparative study of Kurdistan and Lebanon would make for a fascinating research topic. As in Kurdistan, many militia leaders hold important political positions in the Lebanese government. Nonetheless, their treatment of the media in Lebanon is much more professional and journalists enjoy greater freedom than journalists in Kurdistan. The question is why? It would be in the interest of academics and media professionals in the Middle East to study the difference and to understand what is so special about Kurdistan and its society.



### **5.7. Recommendations & Policies**

- Better education and training: Journalists need to go through a thorough academic background in addition to attending workshops and training sessions to learn the essentials of journalism. However, political officials need to also learn the purpose and essentials of journalism and how to deal with the press in a professional manner.
- The promotion of better media laws: Kurdistan's first media law only covers the print media and leaves out the new media entirely. The KRG needs to ensure that the new media law is modified and implemented.
- The foundation of a new journalists syndicate: The KJS needs to be free of all political officials. A syndicate should be objective and there to assist journalists in need and not to work towards the wishes of political parties. There needs to be clear laws and regulations or a new journalists syndicate needs to be established.
- The activities of NGOs: International NGO's need to tailor their help towards the needs of Kurdish journalists. Rather than imposing their own ideas on the Kurdish media, they need to speak to journalists to define what is really lacking in the Kurdish media scene.

**Appendix 1: Personal Approach and Oral Informed Consent Form**

Dear [name],

I am a graduate student at the American University of Beirut, currently working on my Master's thesis as one of the requirements to completing an M.A. in Arab and Middle Eastern Studies. I am working on assessing the level of freedom of the print press in Iraqi Kurdistan. Accordingly, I am organizing interviews with professionals in the field of print media in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Your professional input as a journalist is valuable and highly appreciated. While the study holds no immediate benefits for you as an individual participant, it hopes to contribute to guiding the actions of local, as well as international NGOs working on improving freedom of the print press in the region. Also, the results of the study will help filling an existing gap in the literature on freedom of the press in the Arab world available today. In addition, it can serve as a stimulus to help raise awareness to the plight of professionals in the field of journalism in Iraqi Kurdistan today. Furthermore, the results of this thesis can serve as a guide for the development of university curricula when discussing the freedom of the print press in the Middle East.

The interview questions will address issues such as freedom of press, media laws and regulations, and the challenges that Kurdish journalists face when working for the print media in Iraqi Kurdistan. The interview is not expected to last longer than an hour. If you agree to participate in this research study, a one-on-one interview can be arranged at your own convenience. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. The risks involved in this study for you as the interviewee, are discomfort when asked a question you do not want to answer. In this case, you can choose not to answer the question that caused you discomfort or

discontinue the interview immediately. No foreseeable expenses on your part are expected. To ensure confidentiality, your name will not appear in the study. In addition, no tape recorder will be used in this study; hence, no direct identifiers such as names or contact information will be recorded. Furthermore, the data you provide will be kept in a file on the student investigators private, locked computer. The said data will be destroyed three years after completion of this study, following institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations.

If you should have any questions regarding this study please contact me or my research advisor and primary investigator, Dr. Jad Melki, PhD Journalism & Mass Communication at AUB.

Thank you for your kind attention and for your consideration.

Best regards,

Aysel Sekmec

Graduate student of Middle Eastern Studies,

Class of 2010/2011

E-mail: [ayselsekmec@hotmail.com](mailto:ayselsekmec@hotmail.com)

Mobile: 70-614-373

**Appendix 2: Interview Questions Guiding the Interviews**

1. Can you please tell me about your work as a journalist? What does your daily routine look like working as a journalist in Iraqi Kurdistan?
2. What is life like for a Kurdish journalist today?
3. What is your a specialization or beat in the media field?
4. Who owns the newspaper you work for?
5. Where do the funds come from that help keep your publication running?
6. Do you publish regularly?
7. Do you suffer from financial hardships?
8. What are the challenges when writing for a newspaper in Kurdistan?
9. What are the regulations and challenges when operating a print press in Iraqi Kurdistan?
10. When researching a story, which official government bodies allow you access to official government records or information? Can you share with me an experience where you had to inquire government records or information? What was the procedure and how long did it take to receive the requested documents? What are the costs of the procedure?
11. Who is eligible to found a print publication and what are the requirements when establishing a newspaper? Can you share with me your experience when you founded your current newspaper?
12. What are the requirements to becoming a journalist? What training programs do upcoming journalists need to go through before becoming part of the professional media personnel? Can you share with me your personal experience when you decided

to join the print media? What was required of you and what were the challenges you were faced with?

13. What are the challenges journalists are faced with when reporting in Iraqi Kurdistan?

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