



## Brief Report

# The Networked Trolling of Critical Journalists and News Organizations in Iraq

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**Abstract:** In this study, we have identified a Twitter network of bad actors mostly affiliated with Iraqi militias that are closely connected to the federal Iraqi government. Using disinformation and threats of legal action, these users often target journalists and news organizations that are critical of them. Three datasets were collected totaling about 16,000 tweets by using 6 Arabic hashtags. We found three major themes: public shaming and personal attacks; legal threats and misinformation accusations; and glorifying Shiite heroism and promoting conspiracies. These bad actors also created a coordinated attack against journalists, news organizations, and human rights activists and even the UN representative in Iraq, Jeanine Plasschaert, falsely accusing her of fabricating the 2021 federal election results.

**Keywords:** Iraq; disinformation; armed militias; journalism; Middle East; Global South



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## 1. Introduction

As a fragile and sometimes failed state, Iraq today is facing tremendous security, economic, and democratic challenges that threaten its very existence (Ismael and Ismael 2015). Since 2003, Iraqi journalists have faced tremendous difficulties and challenges due to the lack of security and stability in the country (Al-Rawi 2012).

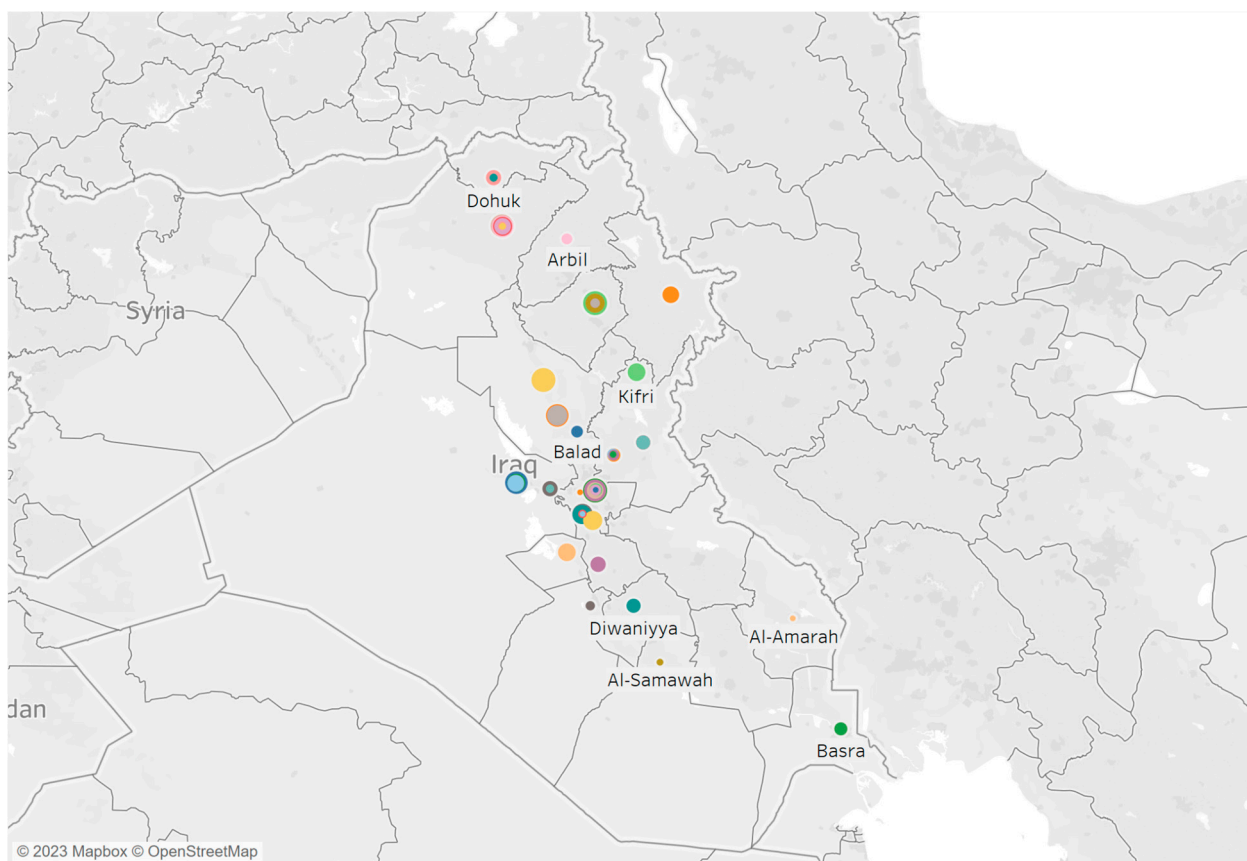
Investigating how Iraqi journalists and news organizations are targeted with misinformation remains under-researched, and this study fills a major gap in literature as it offers many original findings on this issue. Previous research dealing with disinformation and Iraq is largely related to the 2003 US-led war as the discussions revolve around the way the George W. Bush's administration used the false pretext of weapons of mass destruction to attack the country (Foster 2021; Hoyle 2008; Lewandowsky et al. 2013, 2005; Miller 2003; Williams 2004). More recent studies seem to focus on misinformation and COVID-19 in Iraq (Al-Rubaye et al. 2020) or the attitudes of Iraqis towards this issue in the Kurdistan region (Ahmad and Murad 2020; Kaka and Kareem 2022). In terms of news and misinformation, Al-Kaisy (2021) explored the polarized and biased way in which Iraqi media channels that are run by political parties framed issues and spread disinformation in relation to human rights activists. Also, Yaseen and Ali (2022) used discourse analysis to analyze 13 fabricated social media images previously identified by the fact-checking organization Tech4Peace. If we, however, focus on the larger Arab and Middle Eastern context, then we can find more conceptual and empirical studies on misinformation and the reputational attacks against Arab journalists (Al-Rawi 2021a; Bebawi 2022; El-Masri et al. 2022; Jones 2021; Mutsvairo and Bebawi 2019) as well as human right activists (Abrahams and Leber 2021; Al-Rawi 2014; Jones 2022). The large majority of the above studies relied on one research method approach, while this paper employs a mixed method approach to identify and analyze disinformation

targeting journalists, news organizations, and human rights activists. Hence, the added value of the paper is to offer a systematic analysis of the way the journalism industry in Iraq is targeted today with misinformation since there are no previous studies that have explored this important issue which has a direct impact on democracy.

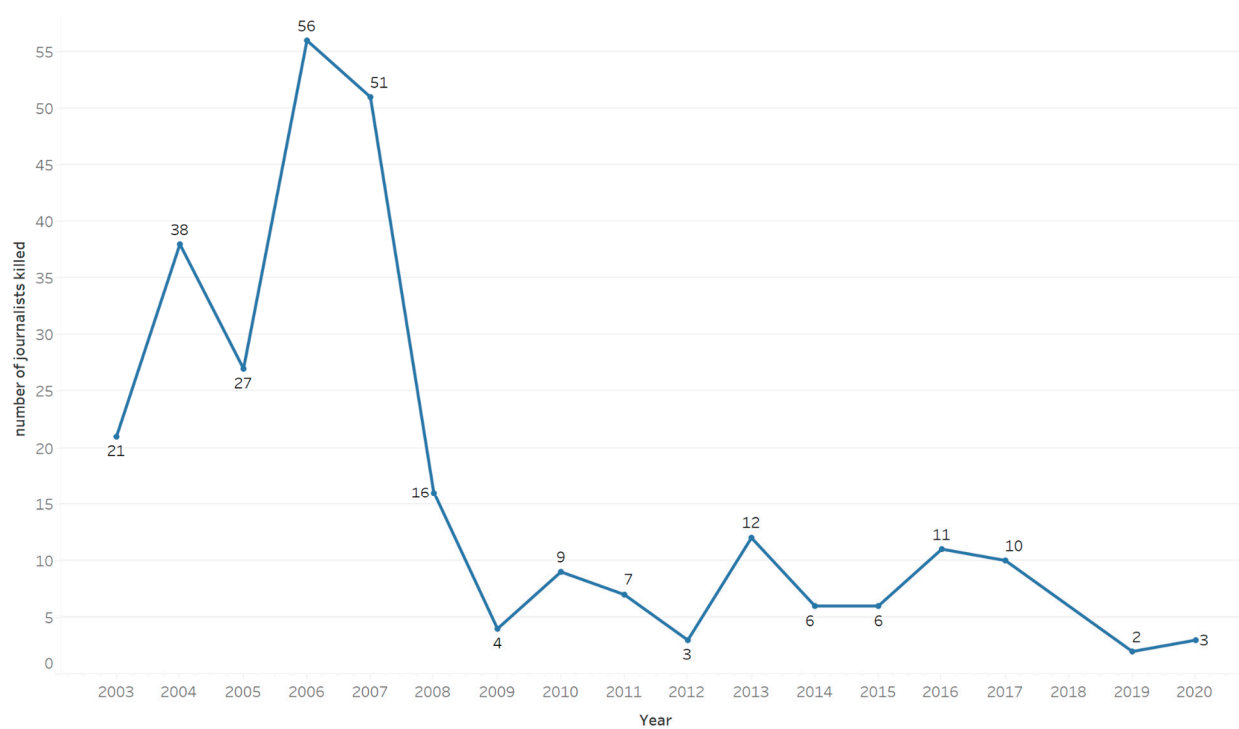
Without a free and independent news media, democratic progress in any country can be hampered (Schudson 1995). In the case of Iraq, that is still suffering from different aspects of authoritarian rule, positive political developments and freedom of speech cannot be easily attained amid the ongoing reputational misinformation campaigns against news organizations, journalists, and human rights activists. As a result, Iraqi citizens would refrain from speaking freely and would end up ill-informed about the political developments in their country, and their voting choices would be impacted. To take one example, Sabereen News is an online news outlet that is active on Twitter (@sabreenS11) having over 95,000 followers and on Telegram (@sabreenS1) with more than 211,000 subscribers, as of early March 2023. The channel is run by one of Iraq's major Shiite militia groups, describing itself as "a voice for the victims anywhere in the world". However, it mostly spreads disinformation and promote Iranian and Russian agenda such as the Russian narrative on the invasion of Ukraine. This news outlet advertises itself as an alternative news channel, and it has numerous other accounts on YouTube, Instagram, VK, etc., with wide networks of sympathizers and supporters who routinely share its news content. To give a few examples of its news coverage, the channel routinely publishes anti-American propaganda content showing Iranian-made drones that are often used against coalition troops and locations in Iraq. It also often attacks Iraqi Kurdish and Arab Sunni politicians accusing them of supporting terrorism, sedition, and treason for cooperating with their arch enemies like Israel, USA, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to topple the Shiite-dominated government. As for human rights activists, those who participated in the 2019 popular protests against corruption are frequently threatened, and they are almost always targeted and vilified by this channel.

As for the Iraqi media scene, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, for example, indicated that 282 journalists were killed between 2003 and 2023 (CPJ 2023). Chart 1 shows a timeline of killed journalists; 2006, especially following the destruction of the Samara Shiite Mosque by Al Qaeda, witnessed the highest number of casualties ( $n = 56$ ). Figure 1 also shows the geographical locations of journalists killed, and over half of them occurred in Baghdad, which is an ethnically mixed city, followed by Sunni-dominated areas like Anbar, Nineveh, and Kirkuk, due to the activities of Sunni terrorist groups in these areas like Al Qaeda and ISIS. For example, Al Qaeda was implicated in the killing of several Iraqi journalists such as the Al Arabiya correspondent, Atwar Bahjat, who was gunned down near Samara (CPJ 2006).

Today, however, the security situation has changed especially following the military operations on ISIS and the major defeat of Al Qaeda; the role and influence of Iraqi Shiite militias like Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah was drastically enhanced as they became part of the current Iraqi state and its political establishment. Adnan Altia, an Iraqi journalist, revealed that he has been "always threatened" due to his work, stating: "I've been persecuted ever since I began to work in journalism. Sometimes by al-Qaida or by armed factions that today are considered part of the Iraqi government" (Almashat 2023). These "armed factions" are mostly Iranian-backed groups that are involved in human rights violations, and they run non-traditional news outlets like Sabreen, especially on the mobile app Telegram, often inciting violence against minorities and human rights activists, promoting hatred, and disseminating religious propaganda. Though these militant groups are currently listed in the US and elsewhere as terrorist organizations, they are actively present on most social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Kataib Hezbollah, for example, controls several news outlets such as Al-Etejah TV and Sabereen News (Knights et al. 2021; Malik et al. 2021). In addition, the majority of militia leaders who are officially classified as terrorists have social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook, some of whom have hundreds of thousands of followers (Abdulla 2020).



**Chart 1.** The geographical distribution of killed journalists in Iraq.



**Figure 1.** Timeline of the number of journalists killed in Iraq between 2003 and 2023.

Theoretically, the paper is based on the study of disinformation on social media which is largely understood as the intentional dissemination of falsehood, mostly to achieve

political or social goals (Bennett and Livingston 2020; Freelon and Wells 2020). We mainly identified disinformation by detecting false information, manipulated images, and some deceptive communication strategies in multimodal social media messages. The paper contributes to the literature on misinformation research by offering new insights and detailing some of the strategies used in a country located in the Global South which is suffering from tremendous political challenges and ethno-sectarian tensions. The study seeks to answer the following research question:

- RQ: What are the disinformation campaigns' major themes and techniques used by militia groups in Iraq against journalists, news organizations, and activists?

## 2. Method

We focused in this study on Twitter since it is popular in Iraq, and the major militant actors and politicians are active on it. Using Academic API v2 access, we downloaded all the publicly available tweets associated with different hashtags by limiting ourselves to the following time period: 1 January 2018–3 December 2022. This time period is relevant because it witnessed most of the attacks against Iraqi journalists and news organizations before and following the 2019 popular protests. For this study, we selected six hashtags that focused on trolling journalists, and we found them in the material for the ongoing other research we are conducting on the protests in Iraq. The first dataset contained 3971 tweets using the following two hashtags: Expel Al Shariqiya (#الشرقية\_اطردوا) and Basrah expels Al Shariqiya (#الشرقية\_تطرد\_البصرة). The second dataset had 10,528 tweets and focused on three hashtags: Al-Bashir is ISIS mouthpiece (#الدواعش\_صوت\_البشير), Al Bashir Camel (#شوز\_البعير), and Al Bashir Camel (#شو\_البعير)—with slight modification. The latter three hashtags are related to attacking the famous political satire program on DW Arabic channel called the Al Bashir show, featuring Ahmed Al Bashir who is considered the Jon Stewart of Iraq (Al-Rawi 2016). Instead of using Al Bashir, the hashtag employs a pun by referencing Al-Ba'ir (or camel) to make fun of the presenter. The final dataset had 1441 tweets and contained 1 hashtag: the judiciary deters the agents (#العملاء\_يردع\_القضاء). The total number of tweets is 15,938, after removing 2 duplicate messages posted by 8612 unique users. We also downloaded all the available images associated with the above tweets ( $n = 1151$ ).

To analyze the multimodal content, we mainly used networked thematic analysis that utilizes a mixed-method approach by making use of the available social media metrics such as the most used hashtags, words, and phrases as well as a close qualitative reading of popular content in order to inductively identify the major themes in the corpus based on grounded theory. The thematic classification of discourses was reviewed and refined by three researchers directly involved in the study. We also used a digital assessment to identify the common users found in more than one dataset listed above, and we downloaded their Twitter profile pages.

## 3. Results and Discussion

To answer the study's research question, we found three main themes that are listed below:

1. *Theme 1—Public shaming and personal attacks:* The bad actors we identified on Twitter focused their attention on attacking the Iraqi journalist, Ahmed Al-Bashir, for the two top hashtags are #Al Bashir\_Camel ( $n = 7990$ ) and #Al-Bashir\_is\_ISIS\_mouthpiece ( $n = 4634$ ). Al-Bashir, @ahmedalbasheer1, is also the third most mentioned user on Twitter ( $n = 249$ ), and the association made between Al Bashir and ISIS is meant to discredit the journalist and belittle his critical positions towards the militias (Figure 2). The second most trolled journalist is Steven Nabil (@thestevennabil), who is a US-based Iraqi journalist and human rights activist. Similar to Al-Bashir, we find that he is called Steven dung (#بعرورة\_ستيفن) which was mentioned 818 times closely followed by Steven is the Embassy's dog ( $n = 245$ ; #السفارة\_كلب\_ستيفن) to allegedly claim that Steven is a Saddam Hussein follower or Baathist as well as a foreign agent working

with Al Bashir for the US Embassy in harming Iraq's interests. The third journalist who is targeted is Saad Al Bazaz, the manager of the channel is another target, and the fourth is Sarmad Al Tae, often showing him as a devil who intends to bring chaos to the country because he once criticized the Iranian-backed militias and their crimes on the official TV channel, Al Iraqiya. Currently, the Iraqi Supreme court has filed a legal case against Al Tae for his criticism (Salim 2022), denoting the pervasive influence of these militias in the Iraqi state (Figure 3). Al Taei is often portrayed online as a joker, a pejorative term taken from the 2019 Joker movie that is used to demean activists and journalists showing them as foreign agents and puppets seeking chaos (Mustafa 2022). In early December 2022, a well-known Iraqi activist was imprisoned for merely insulting one of these militias on social media (BBC News 2022), clearly showing the influential outreach of these militant groups on Iraq's judiciary.



**Figure 2.** Four images attacked Ahmed Al-Bashir and his TV show. The image on the top left features both Steven Nabil and Ahmed Al-Bashir, showing that they both got married. As public displays of homosexuality are not tolerated in Iraq especially by these militias (Human Rights Watch 2022), this image appears to be intended to mock the two activists.



**Figure 3.** Two images attacking the Iraqi journalist, Sarmad Al Tai, and one shows him as a joker.

Personal attacks are not limited to Iraqi journalists and activists but extends to threats and attacks against foreigners like the UN the Special Representative for Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, for her role in ensuring the credibility of the general elections results (Figure 4), as well as other people such as the Ukrainian leader, Volodymyr Zelensky, since the militias side with Russia due to Putin's military intervention in Syria.

2. *Theme 2—Legal threats and misinformation accusations:* Another major theme that is identified is related to directing legal threats against journalists and news organizations as well as accusing them of spreading misinformation by fact checking some news items. In this respect, the most targeted news channel happens to be the UK-based Al Sharqiya channel due to its secular orientation, favorable news coverage on the 2019 Iraqi protests, and critical position towards the militias and the government (Figure 5). The channel is often accused of spreading pro-Sunni and/or Baathist propaganda; the third and fifth most referenced hashtags are #Expel\_Al-Shariqiya (n = 1314) and #Basrah\_expels\_Al-Shariqiya (n = 2118), respectively. The second news organization that is targeted is the Saudi-run regional channel, MBC. One of the popular hashtags, for example, is #MBC\_is\_the\_Saudi\_terrorism\_channel (#السعودي\_الارهاب\_قناة\_سي\_بي\_ام) (n = 907) followed by another slight modification of the same hashtag (n = 174). The fourth most frequent hashtag is #The\_judiciary\_deters\_the\_agents (n = 1441), which is used for all the targeted journalists and news organizations. In this respect, the phrases “spreading rumors” (بث الشائعات), “distorting the image of the society” (تشويه صورة مجتمعات), and “tool for misinformation and lies” (أداة للكذب والتدليس) all occurred 162 times.
3. *Theme 3—Glorifying Shiite heroism and promoting conspiracies:* The third major theme that is recurrent in the datasets is related to highlighting the role of the Shiite militias in the region and promoting some related falsehood.<sup>1</sup> The latter hashtag is a reference to Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis who, together with the Iranian military commander, Qassim Soleimani, was killed by US forces in Iraq in 2020. Many tweets promise retaliation against US forces and/or express direct threats against US interests by showing the different drones and weaponry that these militias control. The messages also emphasize that the Shiite militias are allegedly still in the political resistance phase and that the struggle is continuous despite their major role and influence in Iraq.



**Figure 4.** Two images falsely attacking the UN representative in Iraq for playing a role in the 2021 election results. The first image on the top left states: “The resignation of the UN representative in Iraq is a public demand because she took bribes in return for conspiring with the Iraqi government, her silence towards the killing and arrests of peaceful protesters, and misrepresenting facts”. The second image on the middle top states: “Plasschaert is the devil’s hag”. The right image in the bottom states: “Plasschaert is the devil’s hag. The UN representative of destruction”.

Similarly, this glorification of Shiite symbols and leaders is also reflected in the Twitter profile images chosen by this online community. In terms of the common users, we found 397 accounts whose tweets are found in more than one dataset. The profile photos contain numerous generic or stock photos and fake images taken from the open web. For example, the most mentioned user is @abo\_mzeal ( $n = 408$ ) whose profile image is clearly manipulated (Figure 6). The major profile similarities are related to over-using the images of Shiite imams and leaders like Al Muhadis, Soleimani, the Lebanese Hezbollah leader, Hasan Nasrallah, Qais al-Khazali who is Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq’s leader, as well as Ayatollah Khomeini and Sistani (Figure 7).



**Figure 5.** Nine images attacking Al-Sharqiya channel and accusing it of spreading hate misinformation. The image on the left shows Trump, Steven Nabil, and Ahmed Al Bashir as well as the logos of Al Sharqiya, Shako Mako, Basrah, and Dijla channels and the US State Department outlet, Al Hurra. The statement reads: “Hey Trump, you own the [news] outlets, but we own the reality”. The alleged reality here is a reference to mass protests on the ground.



**Figure 6.** The manipulated Twitter profile image of the most mentioned user.



**Figure 7.** Sample of 40 Twitter profile images showing the common figures that are featured.

On the other hand, many tweets promote conspiracies like the claim that the US supports ISIS (Image 1—Trump near ISIS flag) or the idea that there is hidden regional and global agenda aiming at weakening the Shiite community and destroying the livelihoods of innocent civilians. Such conspiracies are meant to enhance the sense of Shiite victimhood in order to gather more support.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this study, we analyzed three datasets, totaling approximately 16,000 Twitter mentions, collected using hashtags that are commonly employed by two militia groups currently active in Iraq (Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah), both deemed terrorist organizations by the US government. We identify three major themes in the tweets: public shaming and personal attacks; legal threats and misinformation accusations; and glorifying Shiite heroism and promoting conspiracies. Similar to the claims made by [Wasserman and Madrid-Morales \(2022\)](#), our analysis demonstrates that further research is needed to understand how disinformation campaigns operate in an understudied Global South context and in a non-European language, and how these campaigns routinely target journalists who often face high levels of physical and legal risk. Any journalist, news organization, or activist who is critical of the Shiite militias or some government officials is considered Batthist, foreign agent, and/or belonging to ISIS or Al Qaeda to discredit their causes or the credibility of news coverage. Often, legal action and/or accusations of spreading misinformation are directed at the above actors in order to silence them. We further identify that the same accounts were used to malign the UN Special Representative in Iraq.

The techniques of disinformation campaigns examined here are similar to other national contexts and case studies such as that run by Russian, Iranian, Saudi, and Chinese trolls especially their focus on disseminating conspiracies, personal attacks, and sectarian propaganda ([Al-Rawi 2021b](#); [Elsawah and Alimardani 2021](#); [Jones 2021](#); [Payton 2020](#)). Future research needs to take into account other journalists based in different parts of Iraq like Kurdistan, while other online sites such as TikTok and Instagram need to be incorporated. Further, it will be useful to examine whether there is gendered targeting of Iraqi journalists and how it is manifested in a conservative society like that of Iraq.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> For example, the hashtag #Hashid\_Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces (#الشعبى\_الحشد)), which refers to the Shiite militias tasked with fighting ISIS, was mentioned 157 times, followed by #Hashid\_anniversary (#الحشد\_عيد) (n = 127), the unified\_Shiite\_House (#واحد\_الشعبى\_البيت) (n = 94), we\_liberated\_Western\_Iraq (#الغريبه\_الحرنا\_احنه) (n = 98), and the #Muhandis\_the\_founder (#المهندس) (n = 81).

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