THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

The Media and Social Media Debate around the Call for the Demolition of Shiite Religious Shrines in Iraq

September 2022

SK eyes

Internews

Friday Preacher Ali al-Masoudi, affiliated with the Babylon Shiite religious authority, Mahmoud al-Sarkhi, called for the demolition of Shiite religious shrines and sites on the grounds that they violate Islam.

Table of Contents

ENQUIRE (Enhancing Quality Information on Religious Freedoms) is a regional program, led by Internews, which aims to promote a culture of respect for religious diversity in MENA countries where religious freedom is facing challenges. ENQUIRE focuses on strengthening the capacity of journalists to securely produce and disseminate high-quality, conflict-sensitive, and inclusive content on key religious freedom issues.

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Introduction

Case Background

Two days after Friday preacher, Ali al-Masoudi, called in the Husseiniya of Al-Fath Al-Mubeen, affiliated with the Shiite religious authority, Mahmoud al-Sarkhi, in the Hamza district of the Babylon Governorate, for the demolition of Shiite religious shrines and sites in Iraq on the grounds that they violate Islamic law, a wave of political and popular protests ensued.[1]

Angry protesters set Sarkhi's office ablaze in the central Babylon province of Iraq on April 12, 2022, as they called on security forces to arrest anyone who encroaches upon religious symbols. Meanwhile, the Babylon police chief ordered shut all Husseiniyas and offices belonging to Sarkhis. The Iraqi National Security Agency, affiliated with the prime minister's office, announced on April 11, 2022 the arrest of an individual who called for the demolition of religious shrines in a social media video.

In a statement, the leader of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, called for refraining from "turning a blind eye to the developments unfolding in Iraqi society, including the spread of corrupt ideologies here and there." In his statement, Sadr said, "Some of those who traditionally follow Sarkhi — and I do not know whether or not Sarkhi is aware of this — are trying to introduce aberrant ideas into the honorable doctrine and the Jaafari creed, as recently evidenced by the Friday cleric's call in the province of Babylon for the demolition of graves."

"This is why I expect Sarkhi to disavow this criminal… within a maximum period of three days. Otherwise, I find myself obligated to deal with them and their ilk as dictated by my conscience, religion, and sect, and in accordance with the Shariah, the law, and reasonable social custom," Sadr went on to say.

But Who is Sarkhi?

Mahmoud Abdul-Ridha Muhammad, known as "Mahmoud al-Sarkhi," has supporters in the southern governorates of Iraq. He has expressed critical views of the parties that have ruled the country after 2003, and issued stances against positions of the supreme Shiite religious authority in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, including his declaration of jihad against the Islamic State (IS) organization in 2014.

Sarkhi was born in the city of Kadhimiya in Baghdad in 1964 and studied in his hometown. He graduated from the University of Baghdad – College of Engineering in 1987, and only entered the Hawza [Arabic for Shiite Seminary] in Najaf in 1994. The Shiite religious circles consider Sarkhi as a prominent cleric who made a great deal of achievements, as he has published dozens of books and letters on various religious topics. While he does not have a large following, the fact remains that such followers are estimated at tens of thousands, and they reside in different Iraqi governorates, most notably Karbala, Nasiriyah, Diwaniyah, and Basra. Sarkhi is considered a moderate Shiite religious scholar with views against sectarianism. He calls for a state in which no individual is discriminated against based on their sect, religion, or nationality. He believes that the concept of "the most knowledgeable mujtahid" [Arabic for a person accepted as an original authority in Islamic law] must be established through Ijtihad itself [Arabic for

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1- The information in this summary is from the following articles: (After Call for Demolition of Shrines in Iraq, Sadr Calls for Accountability, as Police Close Headquarters of Authority Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi), (Al-Jazeera Net) - (Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi: Who is he and why did he spark outrage in Iraq?), (BBC Arabic).

effort to find a solution to a legal, religious question]. He adopts opinions that differ from positions of other religious scholars, and follows the regenerative scientific school, meaning the Two Sadrs School (Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, who was executed in 1980 and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was assassinated in 1999).

Monitoring Methodology

Media Platforms

The report monitors the number and types of media material covering this topic and published by the monitored media platforms. It analyzes the content of the material, the way it tackles the topic, its degree of reliance on objective sources related to the story, as well as its way of addressing the religious aspect. The report also analyzes the dates on which the biggest number of stories were published and the reasons justifying such record numbers, as it dives into the relationship between the religious aspect, which is the research topic, as well as the "political deadlock" plaguing Iraq. Differently put, it monitors the exploitation, effect, and coverage of the issue, as well as the role that media outlets play in this regard.

To find content about the topic, the following keywords were looked up: "Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi," "Sarkhi," "Ali al-Masoudi," "Masudi," "Demolition of Shiite shrines," "Shiite shrines," "Demolition of Shiite religious shrines," "Shiite sites" "Demolition of Shiite religious shrines and sites," "Sarkhi," "Masoudi's call," "Al-Hussein Army," "Babylon," "Masoudi's arrest," and "Sarkhi's headquarters."

The research is limited to the period in which the calls were issued, namely from April 8 to 28, 2022, about a week following the issuance of prison sentences against the offenders in the case at hand.

Social Media

With the rise of social media platforms, the definition of "media" has expanded far beyond its original scope. Several years ago, media monitoring would involve observing and noting down what offline outlets such as newspapers and TVs published. Today, nearly everyone with access to the Internet can have a voice online. This entails an extensive amount of information that is, even if informally, a part of "media" that cannot be excluded or ignored today. Realizing the vastness of the task ahead, we strived to be as accurate and efficient as possible in the monitoring efforts. These additional layers of complexity required the involvement of specialized entities with access to large amounts of data, as well as the software to sort through it and get the relevant content. This process renders it safer to understand whether the case study's events were reflected in the online arena and if so, how. It is also important to note that this report was not conducted as a comprehensive view of the digital landscape but with the aim to highlight prominent actors, the platforms used, and possible patterns as true to life as possible. This is the first in a series of reports which will utilize such technology to paint a clearer picture of the discussions taking place online.

Monitoring Period: April 10-25, 2022.

The keywords fed into the machine learning monitoring software are as follows:

- محمود الصرخي

- الصرخي

- علي المسعودي

- المسعودي

- هدم المراقد الشيعية

- المراقد الشيعية

- هدم المزارات الدينية الشيعية

- المزارات الشيعية

- هدم المراقد والمزارات الدينية الشيعية

- دعوة المسعودي

- الصرخيين

- جيش الحسين

- بابل

- اعتقال المسعودي

- مقر الصرخي

- دعوة المسعودي

Media Monitoring Results

The Sarkhi Case in Traditional Media

To select the media outlets upon which the report would be based, we relied on the Iraqi media outlets mentioned in the report "Media Coverage of Religious Freedom and Diversity in Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan," some of the websites that are referred to the most on Iraqi social media platforms, some well-known TV channels, and the websites of some traditional dailies.

The research monitored 11 Iraqi media platforms, including four TV channels (Al-Iraqiya News Channel - Al-Sharqiya TV - Alsumaria TV - Dijlah TV), three newspapers (Al-Sabaah - Azaaman - Al-Zawra), two websites (Nas News - Shafaq News), and two news agencies (Iraqi News Agency - Al-Forat News Agency), as shown in Chart 1.
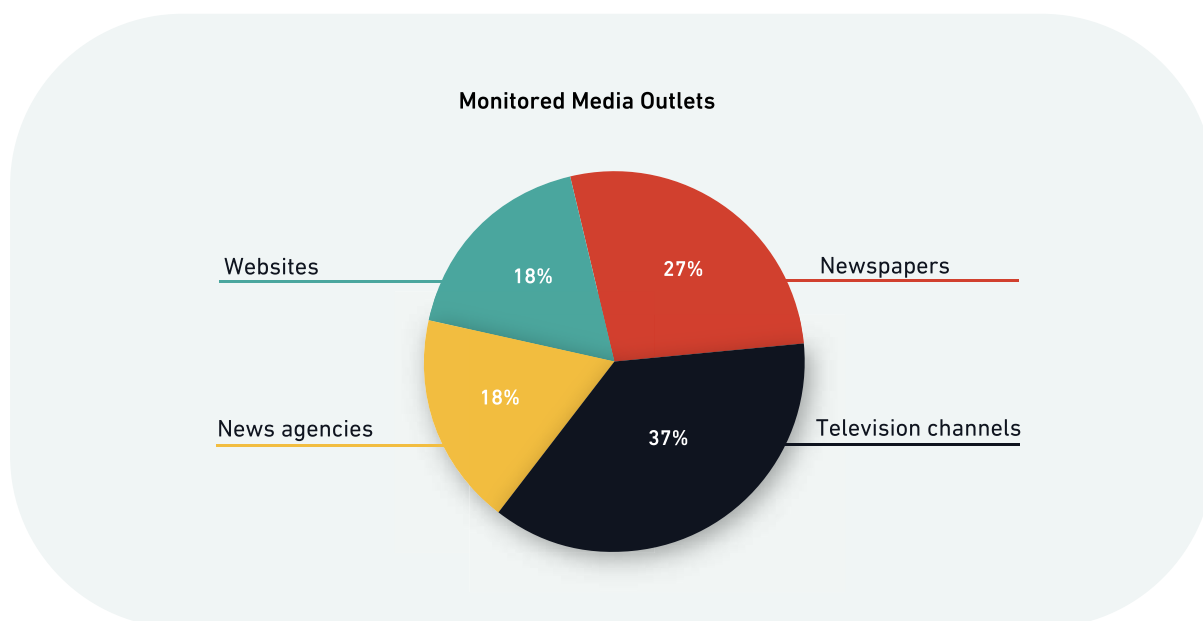

Monitored Media Outlets

Websites 18%
Newspapers 27%
News agencies 18%
Television channels 37%

Chart 1: Chart depicting distribution of monitored media outlets

Distribution of Published Stories

Websites 32%
Newspapers 12%
News agencies 17%
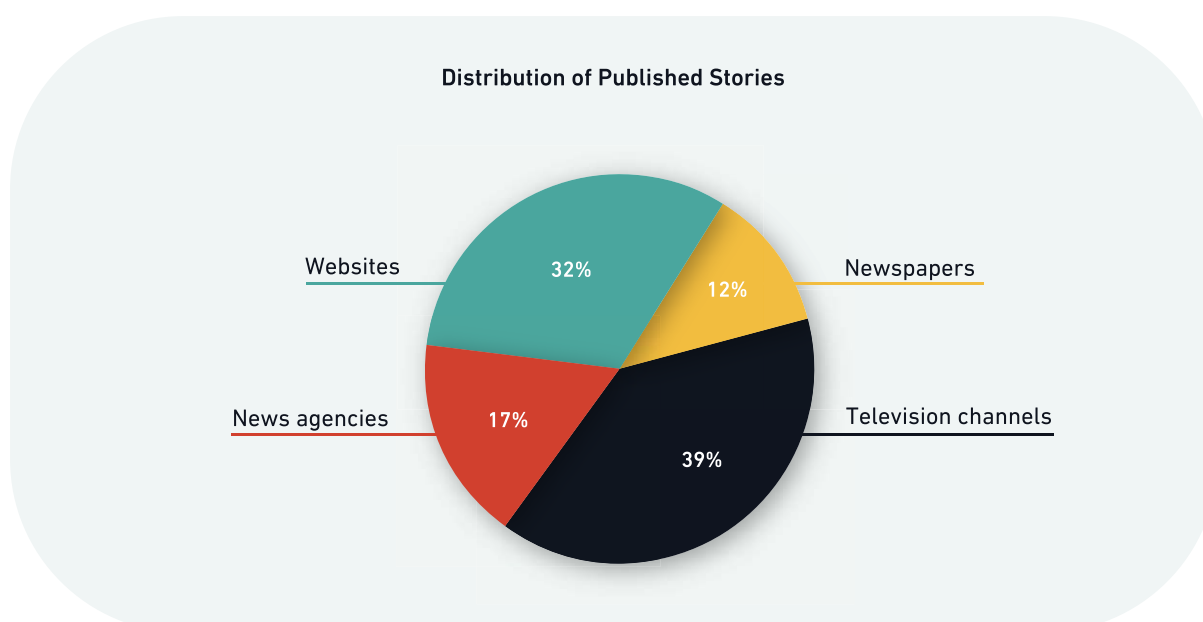Television channels 39%

Chart 2: Distribution of published stories across different media platforms, which include 75 press stories, 29 of which published on TV platforms, 24 on websites, 13 on news agencies, and 9 in newspapers
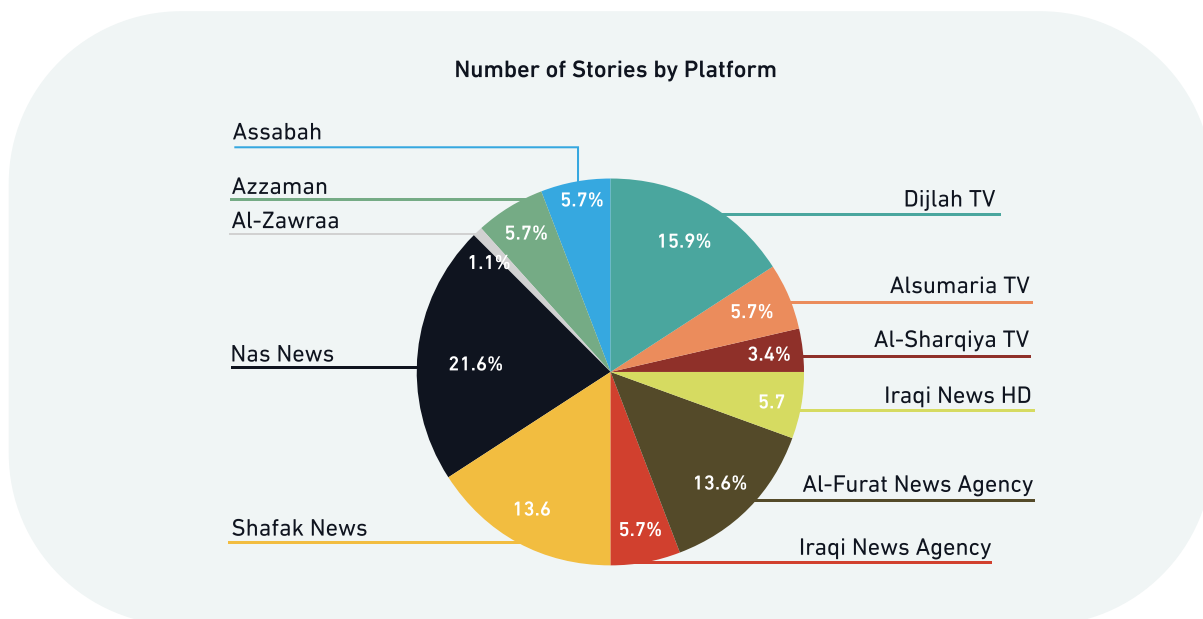
Number of Stories by Platform

Assabah

Azzaman

Al-Zawraa

5.7%

5.7%

1.1%

Dijlah TV

15.9%

Alsumaria TV

5.7%

Al-Sharqiya TV

3.4%

Iraqi News HD

5.7

Nas News

21.6%

Al-Furat News Agency

13.6%

Shafak News

13.6

Iraqi News Agency

5.7%

Chart 3: The percentage of articles published by platform

Type of Published Stories

Texts with video clips

5%

Texts with images

85%

Video clips

10%
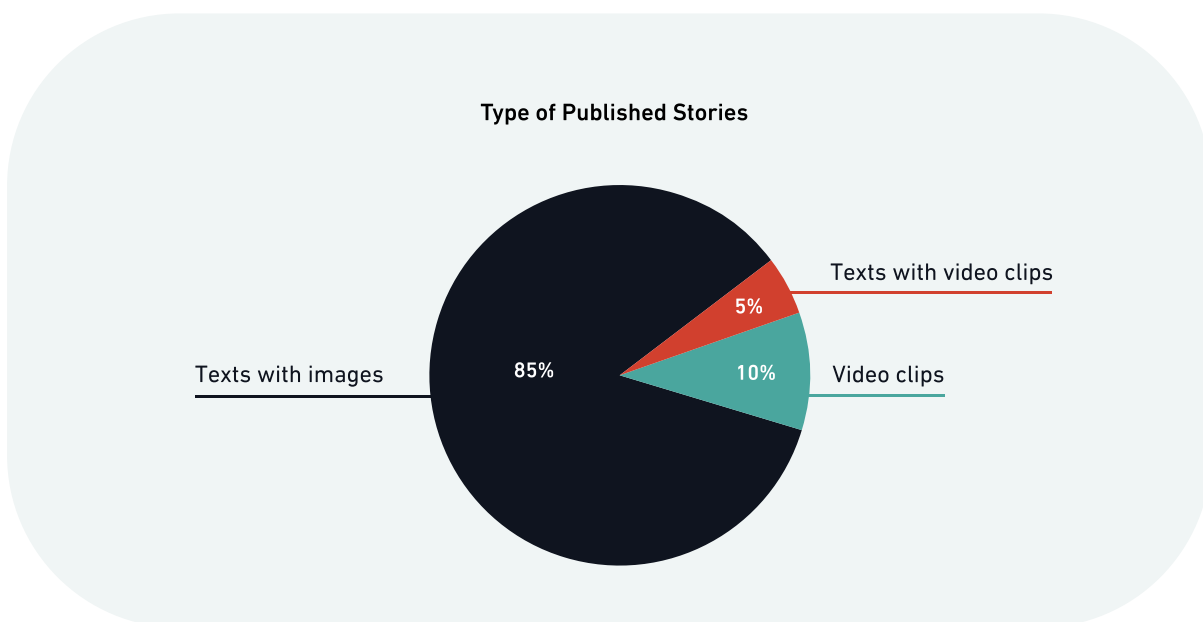
Chart 4: The percentage of published story types, which include 63 stories consisting of texts and images, seven video clips and four texts with video clips
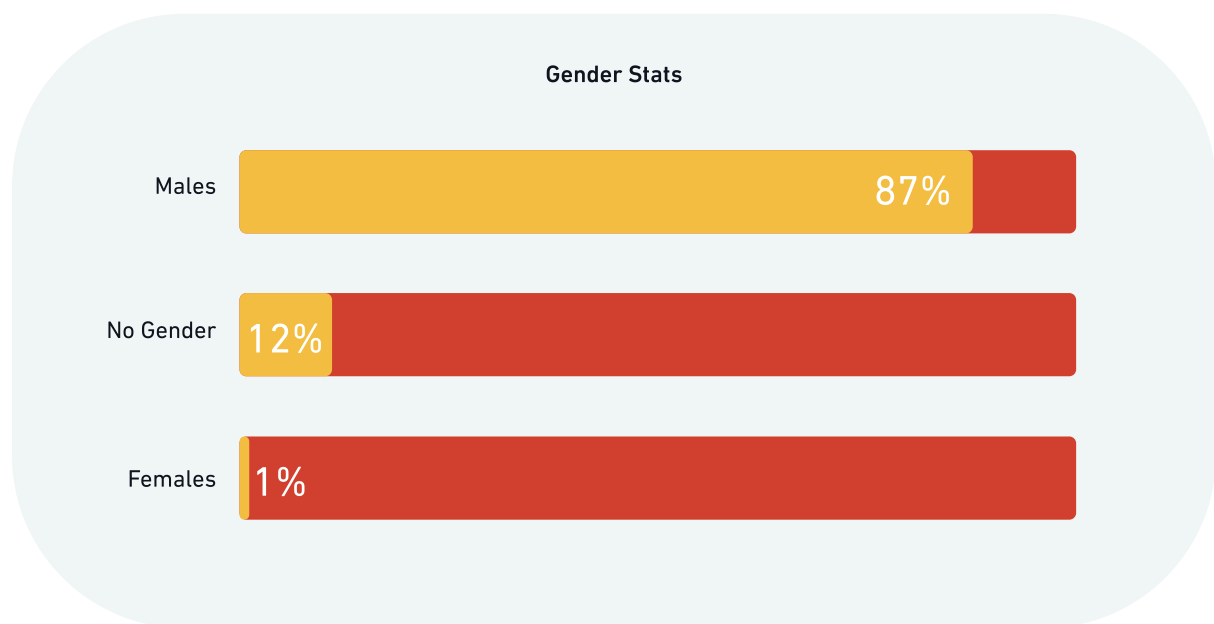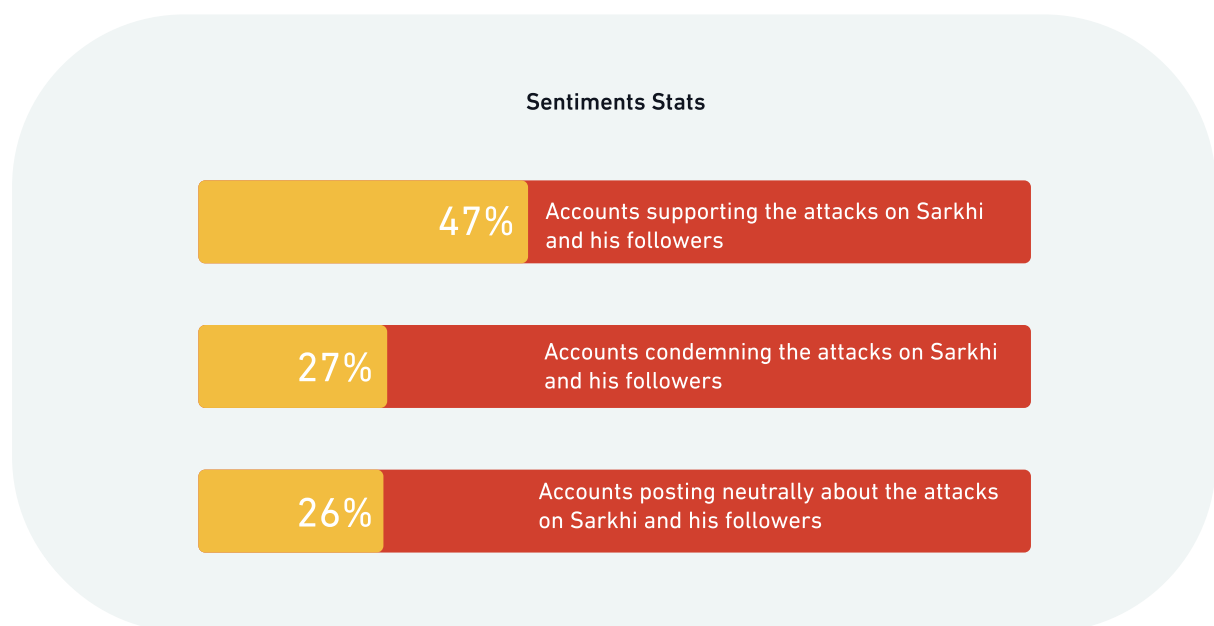
The Sarkhi Case on Twitter

Gender Stats

Males **87%**

No Gender **12%**

Females **1%**

Chart 5: Account distribution by gender

Sentiments Stats

47% Accounts supporting the attacks on Sarkhi and his followers

27% Accounts condemning the attacks on Sarkhi and his followers

26% Accounts posting neutrally about the attacks on Sarkhi and his followers

Chart 6: Distribution of accounts between supporting Sarkhi, attacking Sarkhi, and neutral positions

Chart 5 above showcases a distribution by gender among males, females, and accounts that could not be identified as either, with the overwhelming majority of contributors being male. Furthermore, Chart 6 reflects how nearly half (47%) of the accounts adopted a negative tone that targets Sarkhi and his followers, while rationalizing real life attacks taking place against them. This was enough to cause real life violence as buildings affiliated with Sarkhi were burned down. Meanwhile, 27% of the accounts adopted a more neutral stance, either reporting on or asking for more details concerning the ongoing events. Finally, a nearly equal number of accounts (26%) posting online were supportive of Sarkhi and condemned the attacks against him and his followers, oftentimes irrespective of his stance on the shrines. Img. 1, below is a more concrete example of a Sarkhi supporter describing how the scholar was demonized for voicing what the author describes as a valid perspective.

Img. 1: Sarkhi supporter describing how the scholar was demonized for voicing what the tweet's author describes as a valid perspective

In Img. 2 below, Muqtada Al Sadr's post rises among one of the most popular tweets targeting Sarkhi by encouraging his followers to close down the latter's mosques. Although he discourages the rioters from burning the buildings down, his discourse does little to appease the situation, for he paints Sarkhi and his followers in a polarizing color. Another image (Img. 3) shows an account adopting a similar discourse. Other posts (Img. 4) claimed that Sarkhi was an agent for the UAE, Israel, KSA etc., a tactic that is all too familiar in the region.

Img. 2: Sadr demonizing his political/religious opponent

Img. 3: The author states that whoever is bothered by the destruction of Sarkhi's mosques should recall that Prophet Mohammed did the same (therefore it is justified in his view)
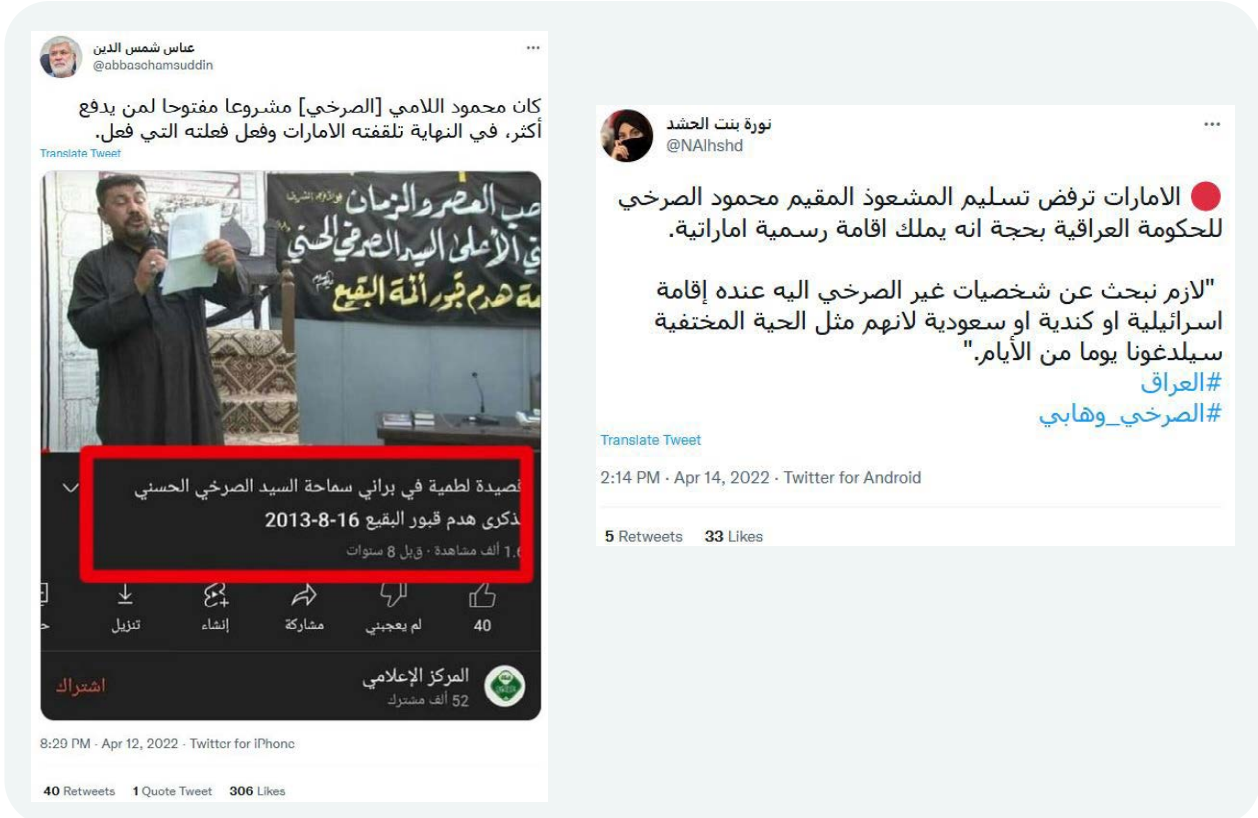
Img. 4: Accounts spreading suspicion that Sarkhi is a foreign agent

Despite how polarized the country appeared to have become, many media outlets maintained a relatively neutral tone when communicating the issue on Twitter. Accounts such as Ayda News, Al Rabiaa TV, Iraq News, etc. were among the prominent platforms monitored; however, only Al Sharqiya was among the selection of outlets assessed in the case study, in Img. 6. This suggests a shift in the balance, as the outlets in the case study were partly chosen based on prominence in the media landscape. Furthermore, this neutral tone also applies to non-journalistic accounts, as seen in Img. 5, where some asked questions about the circumstances or discussed them as they unfolded.
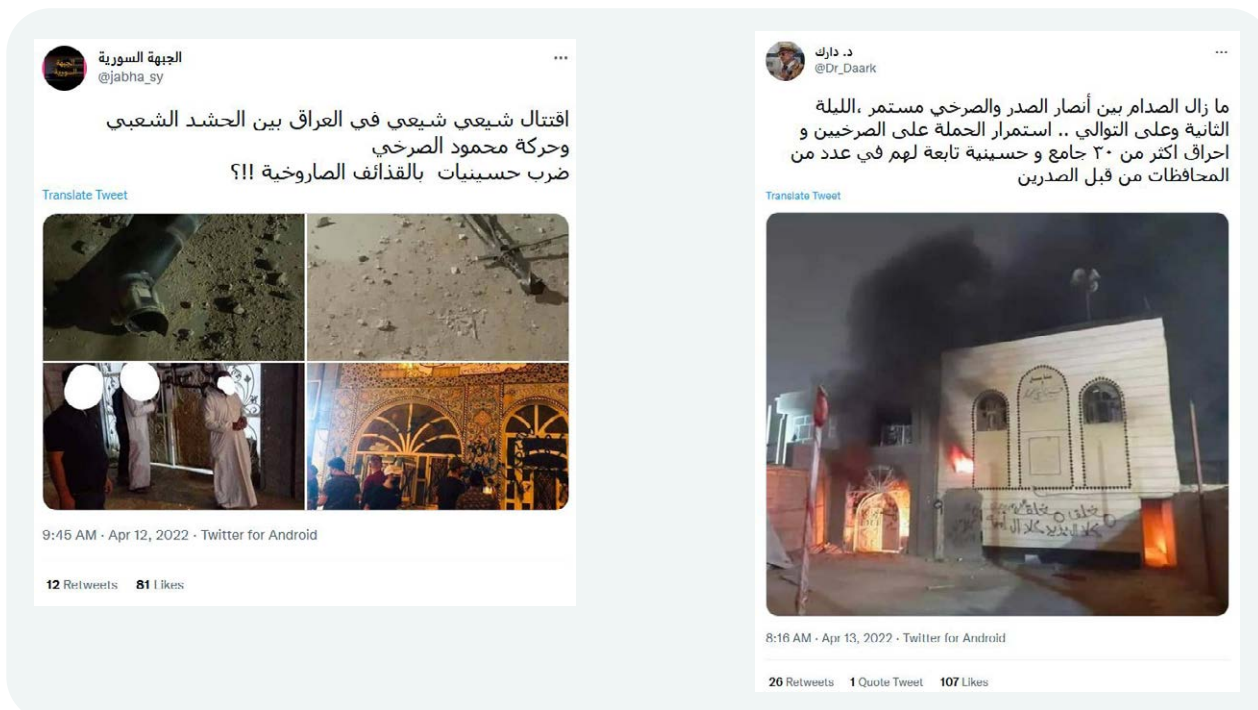
Img. 5: Non-journalistic accounts discussing the violence

Img. 6: Different news outlets adopting a neutral tone
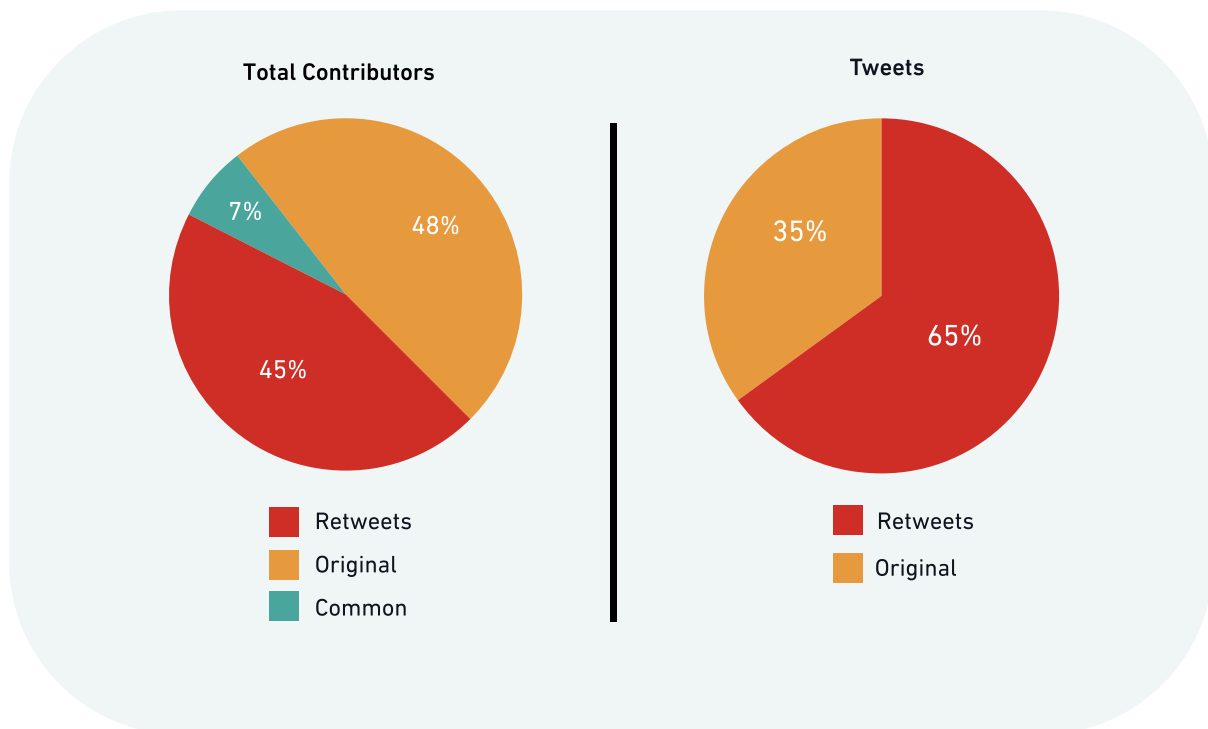

Chart 7: Tweet distribution by type

The total number of monitored tweets is 3,239. Among those, 1,124 were counted as original (written by the account itself) and 2,115 as retweets (shared from the original). A higher number of retweets in this case reveals that the original accounts creating content are strongly influential, regardless of which side they are on. In this case, there is nearly twice the number of retweets for each original tweet (1.9 times to be exact).

By looking at the chart to the left, the split indicates that out of the total 530 accounts contributing to the online discussions, 296 were "Original" creators, while 278 were simply "Retweeters". A

third "Common" category exists and it is usually original accounts who also retweeted content. On average, each original account posted 3.8 tweets, and each account that only retweeted did so 7.8 times. With this in mind, retweets served a primary function in disseminating information and keeping online conversations going. This further shows that highly influential accounts exist in the Iraqi digital scene and they play a pivotal role in pushing the discourse in one direction or the other.

Word cloud

Keyword/Hashtag	Word Count
الصرخي	1,085
محمود	869
الصرخيين	855
الله	403
العراق	283

Table 1: Showcasing top words/hashtags used

While looking at the monitored tweets, it is worth noting that the accounts with the most overall retweets, likes, reach, and other metrics did not post any content that could be categorized as positive or negative but rather remained neutral. This hints that the most influential accounts across Twitter had no intention of steering the conversation in any direction but to primarily report on the events taking place. Those were often either media outlets or random accounts that only posted news, instead of cyber armies or organized networks.

In addition, among the thousands of monitored tweets during the selected period, the top three keywords/hashtags used were "محمود", "الصرخي", and "الصرخيين" (referring to Mahmoud Sarkhi's followers). This reaffirms that the keyword selection entered into the machine learning software indeed monitored the conversations most relevant to the case study at hand. Looking at the rest in the word cloud further shows words such as هدم and المراقد. This indicates that demolishing the graves/shrines is also still part of the online discussions but also refers the burning of Sarkhi's mosques. All of these keywords connect to what was examined in the case study.

Conclusions

The analysis of media coverage and Twitter debates shows the importance of the issue of religious shrines for Shiites in Iraq. However, the Iraqi media's extensive interaction with the Sarkhi calls to demolish shrines is merely political. Also, this observation indicates that while calls for the attacking of shrines were launched in the Friday sermon of April 8, 2022, it was only until Monday, April 11, 2022, that the monitored media outlets reported the story, and according to the published and monitored material, the media only started publishing stories after Sadr threatened to intervene to stop the Sarkhis, knowing that his statement was followed by statements from other political forces. On that day, the case was covered by a record number of stories, as 12 stories were published by the monitored platforms, and the street subsequently started attacking Sarkhi mosques. These moves and the subsequent intervention of the Iraqi security forces also received wide coverage that was more than daily in frequency. There are stories that were published by the same platform such as Al-Sumariya TV with a couple of hours' interval. On Tuesday, April 12, 2022, 12 stories were also published and then on Wednesday, April 13, an all-time record of material was published, amounting to 30 articles, as a result of the developments of the popular and governmental action against the Sarkhis as well as Sadr's statement demanding that the movement's mosques not be demolished and only be closed.
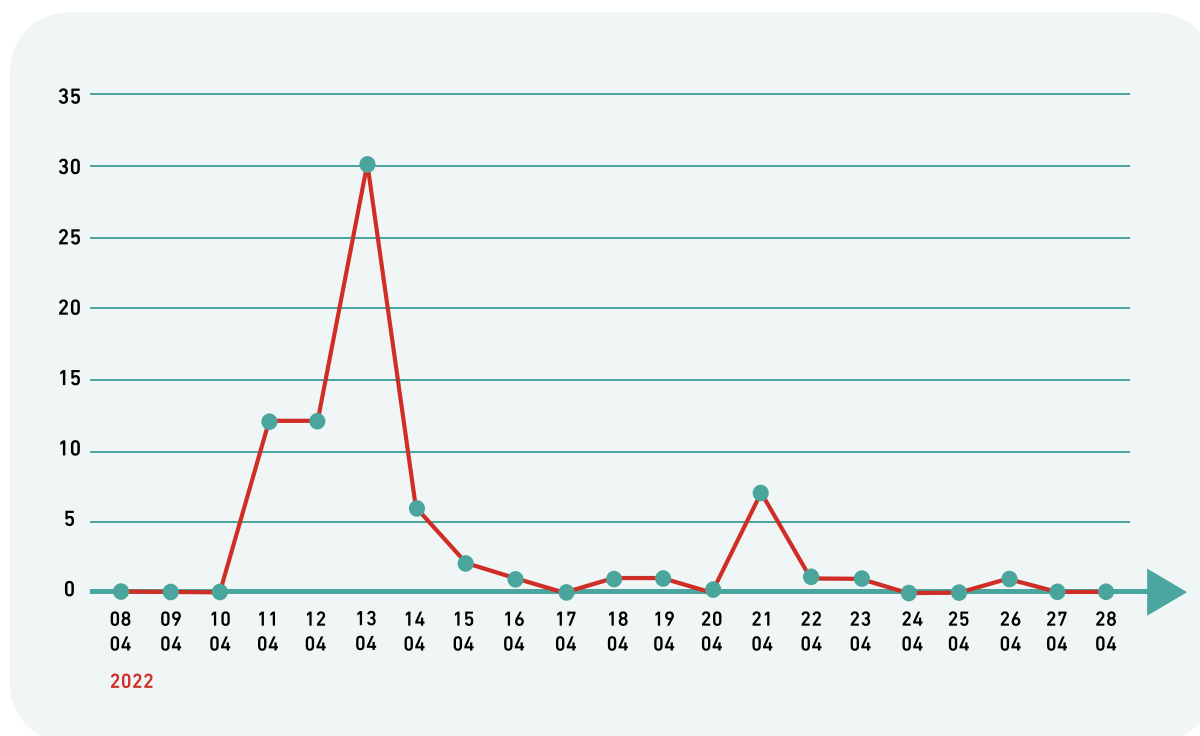

Chart 8: Publication frequency of materials covered

This brings us to the conclusion that the issue was not discussed from a religious point of view but from a political perspective that reflects the political reality that Iraq is going through. This political approach was probably practiced by all of the monitored media outlets due to the fact that Sarkhi is essentially a controversial figure in the Iraqi arena. He once announced his rejection of the fatwa of jihad against the Islamic State as well as his rejection of the infallibility of the Shiite Imams, among other controversial issues that date back to previous years. This political approach could also be due to the current developments in Iraq and the state of political deadlock exemplified by the failure to form a government, let alone solve other matters related to the future of the entire political process.

The Iraqi media outlets have covered the Sarkhi case through frequent publications and in detail, but all of these details were either security-related concerning "arrests - judgments - attacks on Sarkhi headquarters," or political concerning "statements - declarations of positions - statements issued by political figures."

Iraqi TV channels and websites are also seemingly more interested in the issue than newspapers, let alone the country's official news agency. Each TV, website, or newspaper monitored the issue based on its general editorial line, as evidenced by the way the news was covered and the stances of some specific political groups were highlighted at the expense of others.

When it came to the online space, the discussions fluctuated between condemnation of the acts against Sarkhi as well as his followers and outright attacks that reflect the violence taking place on the ground. The one difference is how each side validates their rationale. Those supporting Al Sarkhi saw a duplicity of treatment as his religious buildings were burned down, on the grounds that he allegedly assaulted the Shiite religion through his claims instead of resorting to the law. Meanwhile, those supporting the assaults viewed it as righteous action to protect societal values and sovereignty against foreign interests.

The contents of this report reflect the views of the Samir Kassir Foundation and the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of Internews.