

Media Coverage of Religious Diversity and Freedoms

Iraq – Lebanon – Sudan



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THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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Introduction

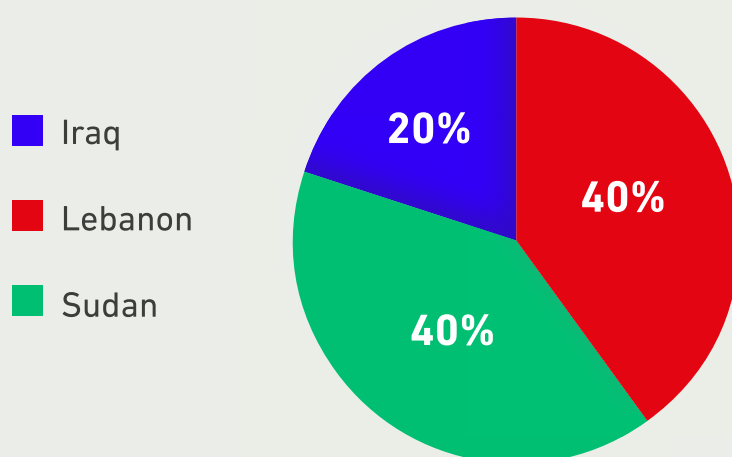
Monitoring and analysing the media coverage of religious diversity in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan, which all suffer from varying degrees of political instability, is a major challenge. In conflicts, politicians perceive most religious events as an opportunity to express their views and convey their messages to foster their interests at the expense of others. Media outlets are either used openly and directly, as is the case in Iraq, or in a smart and indirect way, as in Lebanon, where the media appears, on the surface, independent of political tensions or ahead of official positions. The media platform tackles the religious subject in a way that matches the position of the political party it represents before the latter expresses its opinion. Therefore, several media outlets play the role of a postman, announcing the position of the political party they represent or receive funds from.

The above situation highlights the political and media reality in Lebanon and Iraq. Sudan seems far from the complexities of this experience, both in terms of the form and tools of journalistic work and the overall media reality, which are considered modest compared to the Lebanese and Iraqi experiences. However, if the Sudanese experience differs from the other two, this does not mean that there is no political conflict, and that religion is not used as a vector to express views. In Sudan, the political and media experience is different. The media is still heavily governed by the centralisation of power, even when it comes to independent media institutions. Historically, this centralisation may be directly caused by the presence of the military institution on the Sudanese political scene, even after the popular uprising that led to the overthrow of President Omar Al-Bashir in the spring of 2019. He was overthrown in a military coup following civil unrest. However, the political and media conflict over power remained between conservative and less conservative leaders, not between different sects or religions within the ruling class or competing political parties.

Research Methodology

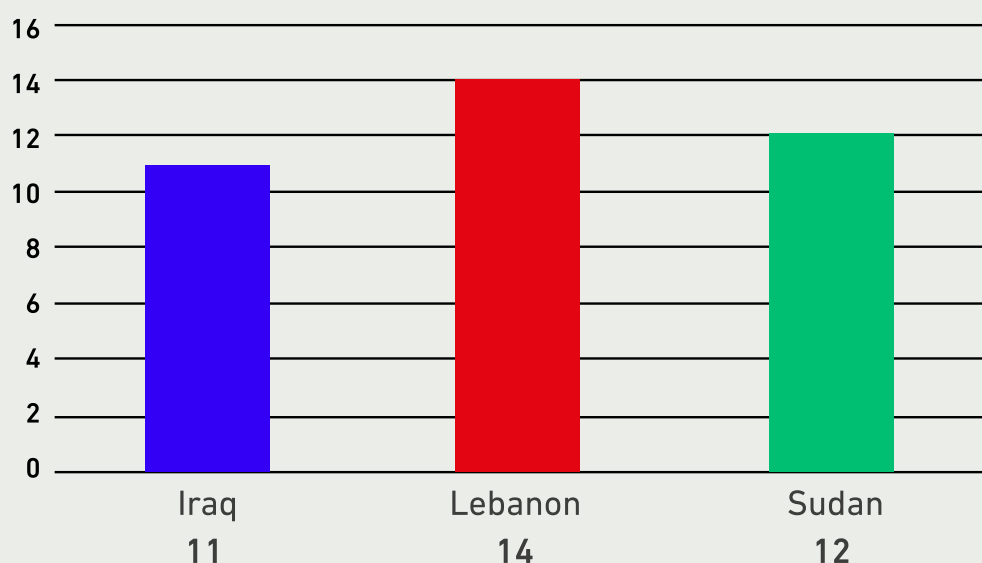
This quantitative and qualitative study aims to review the way local media outlets deal and interact with religious issues in Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan by monitoring the coverage of events related to religious diversity by the most prominent media platforms in these countries. The study began in September 2021 and lasted for a year and a half. Five case studies were conducted, covering various religious issues in the three countries: two in Sudan, two in Lebanon, and one in Iraq (Figure 1). The study also includes the present analytical report on media platforms and their interaction with the political and religious reality, in addition to an extensive analytical report on social media platforms and their use by the most prominent religious representatives, institutions, and leaders in the three countries.

Figure 1: Case studies per country



Due to the mixing of religion with politics, to varying degrees in the three countries, we adopted a methodology that involved monitoring more than one news story of religious nature. It was often impossible to dissociate religious issues from political and social issues, especially in Iraq and Lebanon, and to a lesser extent in Sudan. After selecting the story most closely related to the research topic, which is media coverage of religious issues, we monitored a wide range of local media outlets. Specifically, we monitored 11 platforms in Iraq, 12 in Sudan and 14 in Lebanon (Figure 2). Some of these platforms were selected based on a [previous study](#) conducted by the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) in cooperation with Internews, which tackled media and religion in the three countries. We added to the list used in the previous study the most active and popular platforms at the local level in the three countries. This, however, does not mean that we neglected the other media platforms. The most active platforms were monitored throughout the entire duration of the study to shed light on the differences in their interaction with religious issues, given the different confessional backgrounds of the media platforms, especially in Iraq and Lebanon.

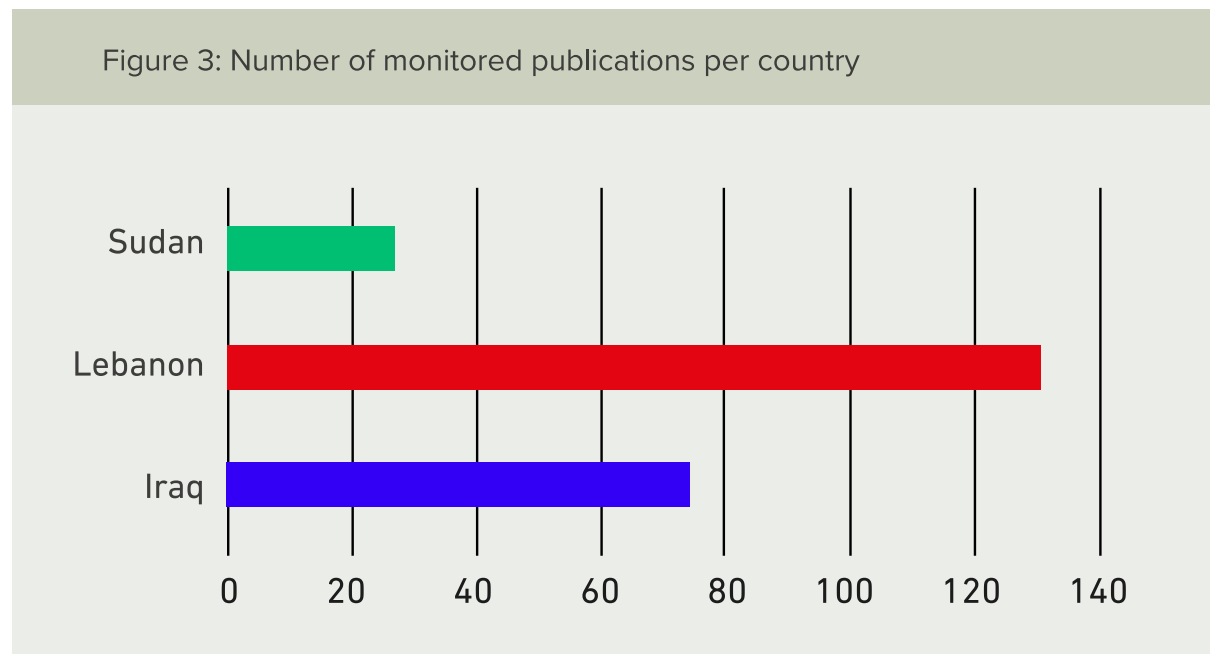
Figure 2: Number of monitored platforms per country



We first selected headlines most closely related to religious issues. The selected stories were then shared with the research team to conduct a preliminary survey as to the prevalence of such news on social media networks, as well as their compatibility with religious freedom and diversity considerations. After approving the news story to be monitored, the targeted duration period was set for each story. We conducted a historical background check of the stories we chose, such as the [Mansour Labaky case](#) in Lebanon and the [calls of Sheikh Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi's supporters](#) for the demolition of religious shrines in Iraq. The historical recollection of the media's interaction with the religious figure or event was used as a case background for each of the aforementioned stories. A specific time period was set in the present without, however, neglecting the historical depth of the monitored subject.

Once the story was selected and the monitoring period set, the media platforms and social media networks were monitored at the same time in the relevant country. In the media platforms section, we carried out a quantitative monitoring of all news publications that tackled the story in each of the outlets included in our list. The subsequent quantitative monitoring is related to the number of publications according to their type. These publications were mapped according to the number, platform, and publication date. The next step was reviewing the publication's interaction with the religious issue and the way it dealt with it. The analysis taking place at this stage shows the extent to which the publication deals with the story, the sources it used to document the news, as well as the type and diversity of these sources – whether religious or non-religious. The analysis also assesses the degree of objectivity in dealing with the story and the level of guidance in the publications. When reviewing opinion articles, one can analyse the media platform's position or, at least, the author's opinion that sort of represents the point of view of the platform since the latter gave them space to express their views.

While working on the five case studies, we monitored 131 news items in Lebanon, to study the case of Father Mansour Labaky and the commemoration of [Ashura day at Al-Madina Theatre](#) in Beirut. We also monitored 75 publications for one case study in Iraq – the calls of Sheikh Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi’s supporters for the demolition of religious shrines. As for Sudan, we monitored only 27 media articles, for two case studies: the first is the [Kassala fires](#) allegedly caused by the jinn, while the second was about [preventing students at the Wad Madani faculty from wearing the abaya](#). (Figure 3).



Report Methodology

The quantitative and analytical monitoring of publications allows us to assess the local media's engagement with each religious issue. This reading refers objectively to the way local media deal with religious issues in general, especially when multiple stories are monitored. This monitoring represents a deeper understanding of the levels of religious freedom enjoyed by the media, based on the way it deals with these issues. The long monitoring period gave us the chance to follow up on dozens of purely religious stories, stories that are both religious and political, or religious and social. The published case studies included only one story each. Therefore, we will present a deeper analysis based on the five previously published studies. We will also provide an analytical reading of stories that weren't published but closely monitored during the study period of a year and a half. In this report, we adopt the aforementioned analysis methodology, by country, and a comparative analysis among the three countries as for the media, their presence and freedom, as well as the relation of these media platforms with religious issues, institutions, and/or figures.

The gap between Lebanese people has widened on the political and religious levels since the mid-seventies of the last century, and the political agreements to end the civil war – both written and customary – have strengthened the presence of community and religion in domestic and foreign politics. This reinforced the presence of religious issues in the media, along with the deeply rooted culture of journalism in Lebanon. Following the consecutive military and political events that Lebanon has witnessed over the past decades, most traditional media institutions are seen as affiliated with a specific religious group or sect: Al-Manar channel, for example, represents Hezbollah and, therefore, a segment of the Lebanese Shiite community. Through its representation of this sectarian and political segment, Al-Manar avoids dealing with issues that are not relevant to its audience, and this shows clearly in the first case study of this research (the case of Mansour Labaky).

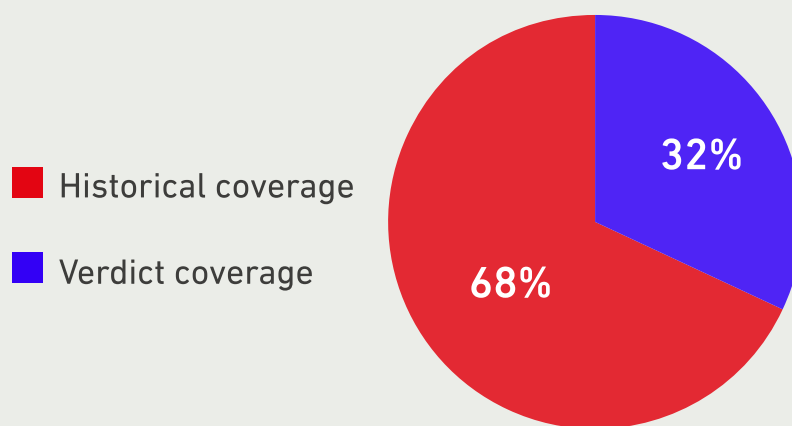
The situation of sectarian political parties overlapped with their media outlets, which ended up representing the party's community in one way or another. However, there were some exceptions to this overall picture, especially with the launch of independent electronic media that tried to move on from traditional institutions whose religious, sectarian, or at least political identity has hardened. These electronic media experiences used a different approach to tackle religious issues. It was a serious attempt to maintain a clear, objective, and professional distance from the issues they cover. Some of these platforms have a clear liberal orientation that is no secret. The list of their employees includes the names of journalists from the different sects and religions to which the Lebanese people belong.

Labaky and Ashura

This analytical study of religious news coverage began from Lebanon with the case study of Father Mansour Labaky's sentencing to prison. In the Lebanese context, the study included another case, which is the commemoration of Ashura day at Al-Madina Theatre in Beirut. The first case was chosen directly, without comparing it to other news, considering the history of Father Labaky's case in the media, which began in 2013. The second case study in Lebanon began by monitoring four stories that tackled religious issues to different extents, but some of them were excluded, such as the story of harassment against female Members of Parliament, because it stems from a patriarchal society and is not directly related to religion. The news of the Lebanese judiciary sentencing Hana Khoder's killer was excluded, because it was an "honour crime" and did not receive any support from religious leaders. It was rather a crime where society asked the judiciary to hold the perpetrator accountable. The news related to amending the Personal Status Law, which prevents Lebanese women from passing their nationality to their children, was also excluded, because it is a recurring issue that is not really debated in parliamentary sessions yet. It was then decided to cover the commemoration of Ashura day at Al-Madina Theatre in Beirut, because it is the religious story that is most compatible with the criteria of religious diversity and free media coverage of religious events and issues.

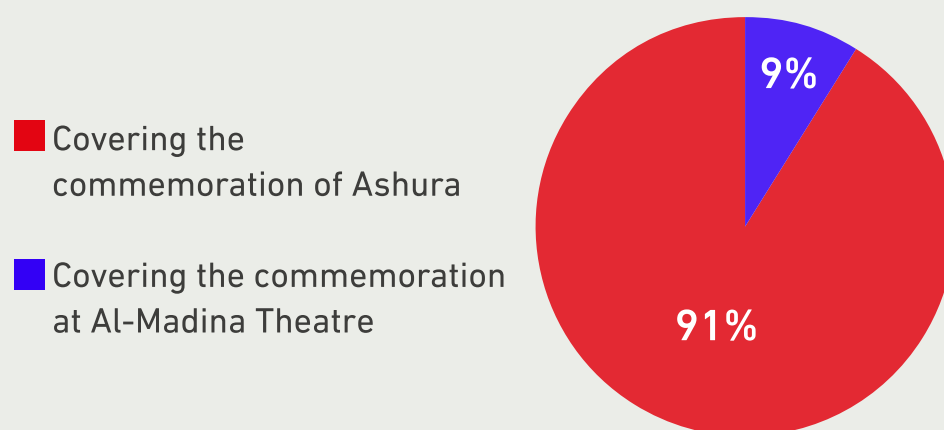
Comparing the two case studies reveals a lot of data in terms of numbers and approach. In Father Mansour Labaky's case, we monitored 50 written or audiovisual publications among the 14 chosen media platforms in Lebanon. The reports were published over different periods of time, starting from 2013 until 2021, when the number of articles reached 24 in less than a month, which means that the current coverage of the case of Father Labaky after he was sentenced to jail in France represents 32% of the total number of publications (Figure 4). This shows a wide interest in covering the story among Lebanese media outlets, except for Al-Manar channel, which did not publish anything about the case, neither in the past nor in the present, while it published 17 articles related to the commemoration of Ashura day in general, but nothing about the celebrations at Al-Madina Theatre.

Figure 4: Coverage of Father Mansour Labaky case

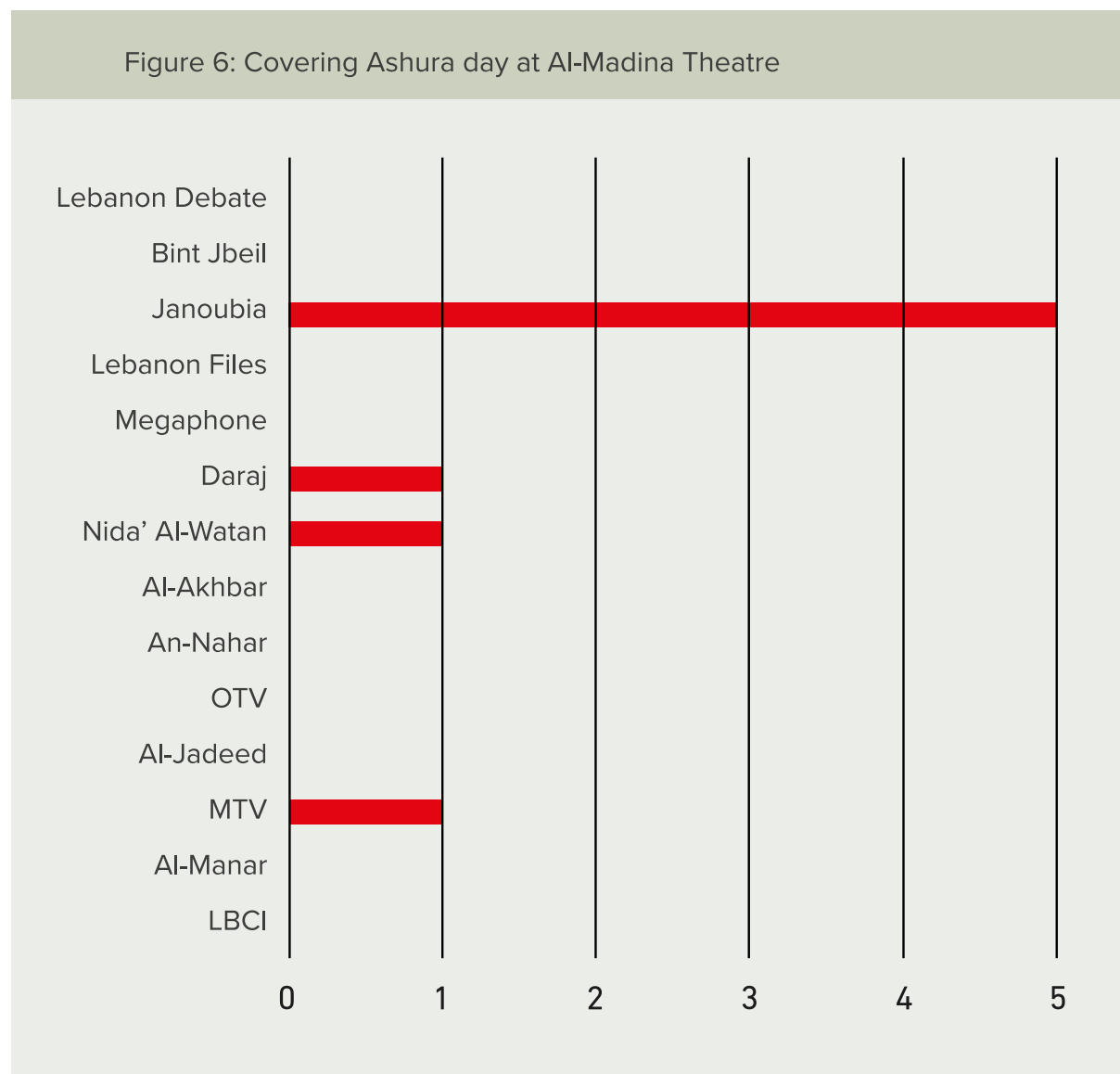


Only eight out of 81 publications covered the commemoration of Ashura day at Al-Madina Theatre – 9% of the total number of publications covering Ashura (Figure 5). The other publications covered the philanthropic services and social activities that accompanies celebrations in Lebanese villages and cities.

Figure 5: Coverage of Ashura day

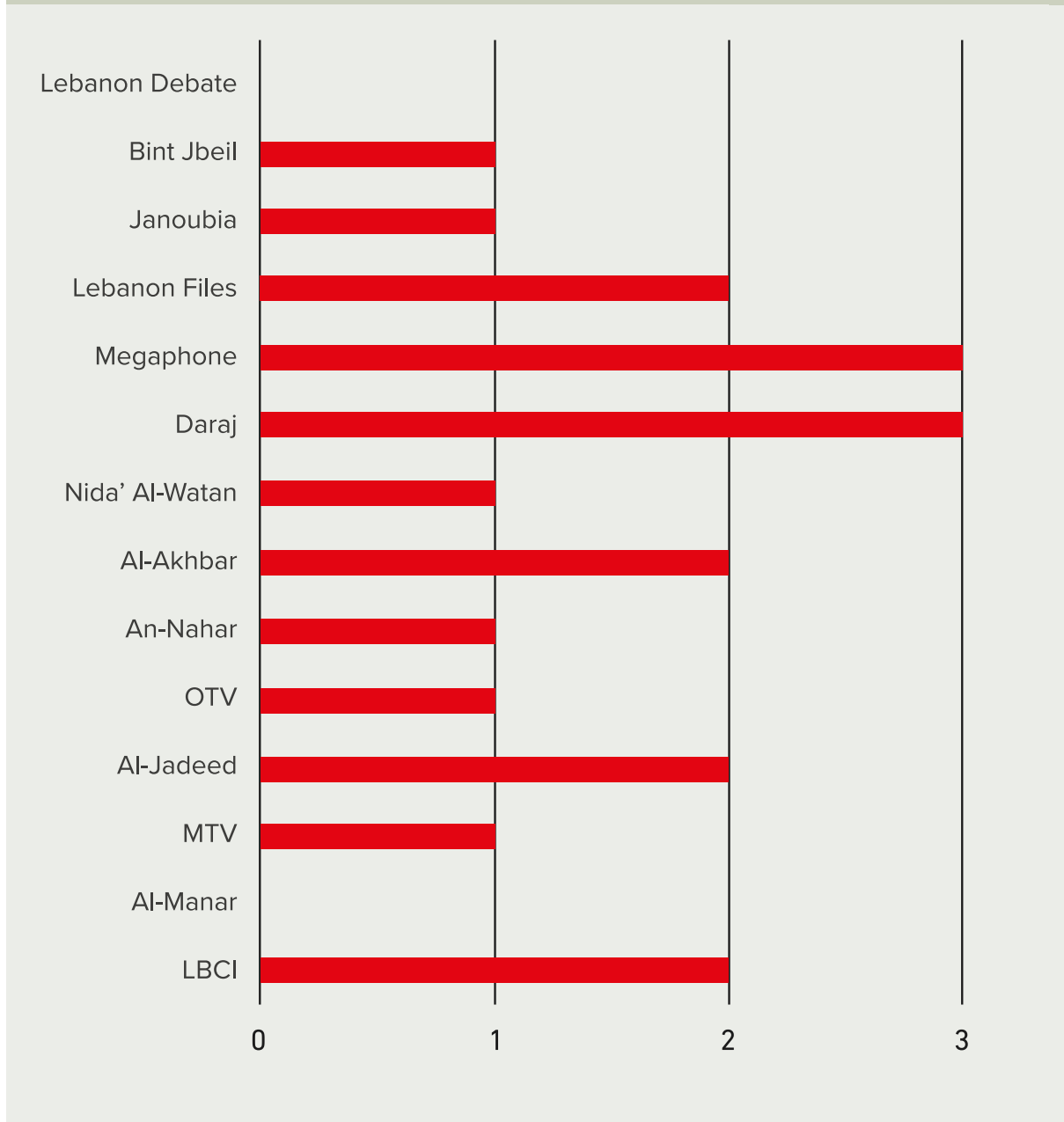


Out of the 13 platforms that covered Ashura day in general, only four published articles specifically about the commemoration at Al-Madina Theatre. Megaphone did not cover either the commemoration in general or the celebrations at Al-Madina in particular, while it dedicated three publications to the verdict in the case of Father Mansour Labaky (Figures 6 and 7).



A comparison of the coverage of Father Mansour Labaky's prison sentence and the commemoration of Ashura day at Al-Madina Theatre reveals that Al-Manar did not feature any coverage of either event on its website or social media accounts. Additionally, the Lebanon Debate website only indirectly covered the two events, with only one article years ago about the Labaky case. Regarding Ashura day, the website published two articles on philanthropic services and social activity during the commemoration period.

Figure 7: Covering the prison sentence against Father Mansour Labaky



The extensive coverage of Father Mansour Labaky's case, whether positive or negative, by the Lebanese media, as opposed to the concise coverage of Ashura day commemoration at Al-Madina Theatre, raises several questions as to the complexities of the political situation in Lebanon, rather than the field of religious freedom. Most Lebanese media platforms clearly avoided covering the event at Al-Madina Theatre because of the nature of the Shiite religious celebration, which has political dimensions, given Hezbollah's considerable political and military weight, as revealed in the data accompanying the event. Janoubia, however, took a different approach, publishing five out of nine articles on the commemoration at Al-Madina, a venue that the website considered the symbol of Lebanon's culture in general, and Beirut in particular, as a free city.

When it comes to the freedom to deal with the case of Father Mansour Labaky, it is not based on the Church's flexibility and ability to take criticism. It tackles the individual dimension of the case, even if the Church faced accusations for not handing Father Labaky over to the French authorities because it considered his case as an individual legal matter. The Lebanese government is also failing to extradite Labaky to the French judicial authorities. However, there is a greater margin of criticism when it comes to Christian figures and institutions. This clearly shows in the language used for criticising the Church's point of view, shared by its spokesperson, as well as attacking the institution that is protecting Father Labaky. The latter is sentenced to prison in France, but the Church is keeping him in one of its monasteries in Lebanon, under the pretext of implementing the verdict of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican against the priest.

Regarding the story's background and impact on the coverage format, one cannot ignore the fact that Father Mansour Labaky's case has a criminal legal dimension, as he is legally convicted of molesting and sexually assaulting children. Therefore, the defence margin is narrow. He was sentenced by an independent, non-domestic court, which allows for bolder media coverage of the story. There is no interpretation of the verdict or claiming innocence, although very few journalists tend to defend him. This solid background in the story of Father Labaky was absent in the story of renting Al-Madina Theatre to commemorate Ashura day. At the heart of the Ashura day commemoration story is the margin of freedom, by renting the theatre to anyone who requests it. For instance, other religious groups have used the theatre to commemorate Al-Mawlid Al-Nabawi. People on social media and several intellectuals denounced this activity, which was reported by Nida' Al-Watan newspaper and MTV. Lebanese journalist Hazem Al-Amin also expressed his opinion. On the Daraj website, he compared the Ashura event to Al-Mawlid Al-Nabawi celebration, which was held by the Sunni Ahbash association on the same stage, while drawing attention to the difference in the political depth of the two events.

The case of Father Mansour Labaky includes opponents and victims who are claiming their right to implement the verdict and hand him over to the French judicial authorities, while there are no victims in the story of Ashura day commemoration at Al-Madina. However, the media coverage of the two subjects sheds light on an important issue: the absence of a clear editorial policy in religious coverage, especially in traditional Lebanese media. These outlets align with the political orientation of the entity they represent, and credit for objective or professional coverage is often attributed to the team working on a particular issue. Notably, the team behind the "Fawda" programme, which was hosted by journalist Joe Maalouf on Al-Jadeed, deserves mention. They conducted a close analysis of Father Labaky's prison sentence, following the case for years across the different media institutions they worked for.

Although new media platforms such as Daraj and Megaphone strive to amplify the voices of people, which clearly shows in their coverage of Father Labaky's case, their coverage of Ashura day commemoration at Al-Madina differs. While Daraj published an opinion article that we mentioned earlier, Megaphone did not cover the topic at all. Additionally, neither platform provided coverage of Ashura celebrations in general, in contrast to other monitored Lebanese media outlets that reported continuously on Ashura-related activities from Tuesday, July 26, to Wednesday, August 12, 2022.

In 2003, the American invasion brought an end to Iraq's totalitarian military regime. Prior to this, the media served as a tool to express an official, ideological point of view. However, following the subsequent political transformation, new Iraqi media platforms rapidly emerged, including privately owned and institutionally supported outlets.

Despite this progress, sectarian conflicts continued to plague the country, with divisions that were kept under the surface under the military rule of Saddam Hussein's regime that had controlled Iraq for many years. The war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the involvement of Shiite militias in the Syrian war, the Iranian infiltration in Iraq, and the emergence of extremist Sunni Islamic groups in the Badia region, all served to deepen the political and religious discord.

Political discord in Iraq extends beyond the Sunni-Shiite divide, with Shiite factions also opposing one another. Some factions are closely linked to Iran, while others are against it. Some participate in the military intervention in Syria, while others reject it. All of these political and religious conflicts, and/or political and ethnic conflicts, are reflected in the media, starting with ownership and the way news stories of religious nature are covered.

In addition to governmental media institutions, institutions supporting certain Shiite currents, Kurdish, and Sunni outlets also exist. There are also independent platforms working towards an inclusive Iraqi identity.

When It Is Too Late for Mere Coverage

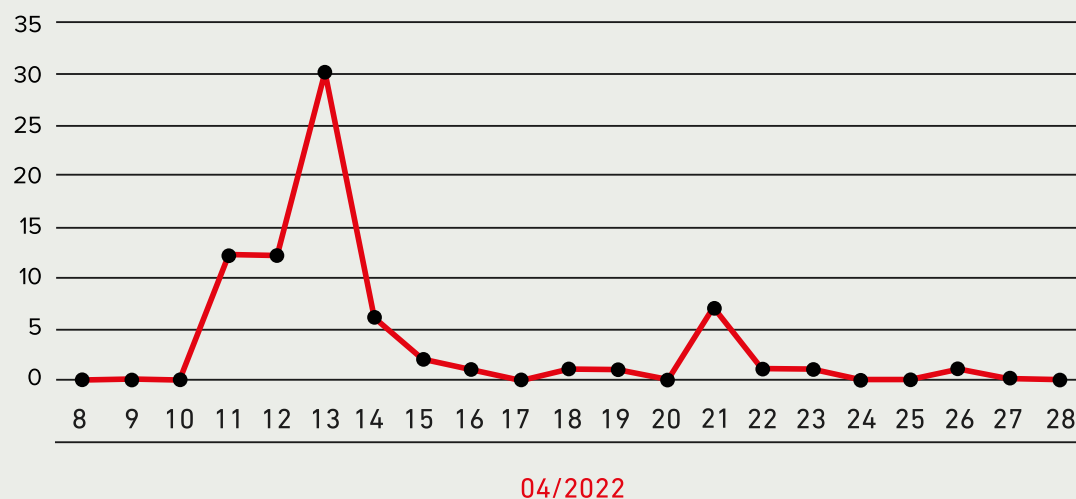
An analytical monitoring of Iraqi media clearly demonstrates that its institutions rely heavily on the political parties with which they are affiliated or funded by. Iraqi political parties often use problematic issues, particularly religious ones, as a gateway to reintroduce themselves to society or to broadcast their political messages to other parties. This method was not only evident during the period of political vacuum in the country that lasted over a year before the government of Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani passed the parliamentary vote of confidence in October 2022.

After the withdrawal of the Sadrist movement, one of the most prominent Shiite political currents, and the end of political frictions, its leader Muqtada Al-Sadr launched a campaign against homosexuality days before the end of the same year. He used his status as a religious leader, not as a political leader, under the pretext of having previously "retired from political life." Although this campaign against homosexuality in Iraq may not fall within the scope of religious freedom, it is in line with the tradition of the political clergymen in Iraq, who often mix politics and religion to fight groups they oppose or promote themselves as guardians of virtue.

Muqtada Al-Sadr also used the same political-religious logic to respond to a call by Friday sermon orator Ali Al-Masoudi, affiliated with Shiite religious authority Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi, to demolish Shiite religious shrines in Iraq, which Al-Masoudi deemed as a violation of Islamic law. In both cases, the media covered the news with criticism, following Muqtada Al-Sadr's statements.

For our third case study, "Calls for the Demolition of Shiite Religious Shrines in the Media and Social Media Networks in Iraq," we monitored 75 press articles across 11 platforms. Our analysis revealed the importance of the issue of religious shrines for Shiites in Iraq. However, the Iraqi media's widespread interaction with the claims of an imam supporting Sheikh Mahmoud Al-Sarkhi's call for the demolition of shrines is purely political. The monitoring process indicates that the calls for the demolition of shrines were first launched in the Friday sermon on April 8, 2022, but the monitored media did not mention anything about the issue until Monday, April 11, 2022. Based on the published materials we monitored, the media coverage only followed a statement by the leader of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada Al-Sadr, in which he threatened to stop the Sarkhi supporters. Later, other political forces followed his lead. On the same day, 12 stories were published across the monitored platforms, and subsequently, the street took action by demolishing the Sarkhi supporters' Husseinis and mosques. These actions and the subsequent intervention of the Iraqi security forces received extensive coverage. Some news stories were published successively, on the same platform, within only a few hours separated, as with Alsumaria TV (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Number of publications related to the Al-Sarkhi story by date



Although Muqtada Al-Sadr initiated the campaign, other religious and political leaders quickly joined forces. The monitored media began hosting speakers, whether religious or political, to express the role of their movement's leaders (and media owners) in opposing Al-Sarkhi and highlight their long-standing fight against him. However, political parties were faster than the media in responding. On April 14, 2022, the head of the National Wisdom Movement, Ammar Al-Hakim, issued a statement rejecting the calls

of Sarkhi supporters. This official statement was echoed by some religious-political factions that indirectly declared their positions. For example, during the “Jumhuriyat Al-Mamlaka” programme on Dijlah TV, the presenter Sahar Abbas Jamil hosted political thinker Ghaleb Al-Shabandar and State of Law coalition representative Alia Nassif. At minute 23:30, the host raised the issue of Al-Sarkhi, recalling his historical presence “with the Sunni demonstrations and his role in the media,” as well as the fight carried out against him by the Al-Maliki government back then. After letting her guests answer, she mentioned again Nuri Al-Maliki’s fight against the Sarkhis because of his deep religious knowledge of them and his “understanding of their dangerous role.” Dijlah TV is affiliated with Al-Maliki’s political group.

All of the above leads to the conclusion that the religious dimension of the issue was not taken into consideration. Instead, the issue was used as a platform to discuss the political reality that Iraq was going through. All of the monitored media adopted this political approach. These problematic stories, such as the case of Al-Sarkhi and his fatwas, may prevent the Iraqi media from covering other religious stories, such as the interreligious dialogues organised by the World Council of Churches to strengthen social cohesion and inclusive citizenship through education, the media, the Constitution, and the modernisation of school curricula. This news was only published on one platform on December 16, 2022, while the Iraqi media was busy with Muqtada Al-Sadr’s statement against homosexuality.

The aforementioned facts confirm the absence of editorial policies among these media outlets. Governmental institutions cover government activities and relevant matters, while private institutions or those funded by certain political and religious currents cover the news of these parties and their actions. They also change their political orientation and interests based on the statements issued by the leaders of these movements. These institutions, therefore, suffer from a structural imbalance in their editorial policies due to their functional bias in favour of their respective political patrons or funding institutions. Strengthening the professional media presence in Iraq could be achieved by supporting and developing independent media outlets, from funding to editorial policies. The support and development should be reflected in the media’s handling of all files, including religious issues and their coverage.

Sudan

The situation in Sudan differs from that of Iraq and Lebanon. The country has never experienced true civilian rule, despite its decentralised government structure, known as “State Rule.”¹ In this large country, which is divided into 17 states, the independent media sector is not sufficiently developed. Even the government media is insignificant when compared to the media experiences of Lebanon and Iraq. This is due to several reasons, most notably the totalitarian rule and the ongoing military control of all parts of the state for decades, and even after the protests that led to the overthrow of President Omar Al-Bashir.

However, the 2019 political uprising led to an increased use of social media networks as alternative media platforms, and traditional platforms began to use these networks in order to reach a wider Sudanese audience, especially young people. However, censorship still affects the publications on these platforms.

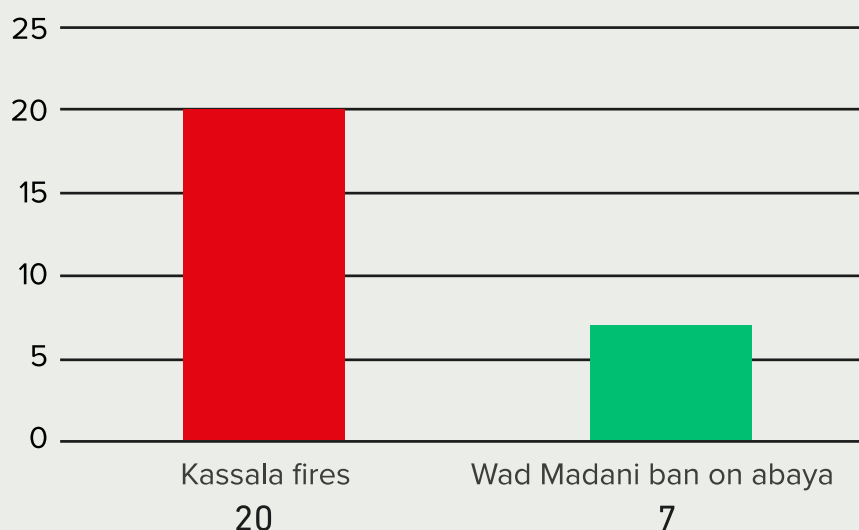
Unlike Lebanon or Iraq, Sudan does not have many sects and religions. Sudanese people are mostly Muslim, with a Christian minority and some local beliefs. Perhaps these factors have contributed to the lack of media interest in religious issues in general, as media outlets are mostly occupied with covering political and economic activities. Religious issues gain media attention if they are related to services or social issues, such as the Kassala fires story, which led to the displacement of dozens of families. This prompted the local government, represented by the governor, and the central government to intervene and therefore led the media to cover the story.

Media Coverage Depends on the Agenda of the Khartoum Central Government

The story that catches the central government’s attention is covered by the media and its platforms. A comparison between the two case studies in Sudan, “Sudanese Media Coverage of Fires that Destroyed Several Homes in Kassala – Residents Accuse the Jinn” and “Preventing the Wad Madani Faculty of Medicine Female Students from Wearing the Niqab and Abaya in the Sudanese Media,” provides an analysis of Sudanese media. We monitored 20 publications tackling the first story about fires in Kassala, which spread during February 2022. However, the four TV channels that were monitored at that time did not publish anything about the story. As for the second case study in Wad Madani, we monitored seven publications (Figure 9). The same four channels, including state television, overlooked the story. This indicates a lack of editorial consistency in the way TV channels address issues of a religious nature. In short, this approach is characterised by a general lack of interest.

¹- Term used by the Cabinet Presidency website (<http://www.sudan.gov.sd/index.php/ar/pages/details/7/2>).

Figure 9: Number of monitored publications for each case study



The stark contrast between the two stems from the newspaper coverage. The three monitored newspapers dedicated 15 publications of various types, from news to opinion articles, to the Kassala fires, while the ban on abaya story was only covered in three publications, brief reports at best. Several reasons explain this contrast, but the most prominent is undeniably that the issue of jinn and fires in the Kassala State also happened in other states before and was previously discussed, while the issue of banning the abaya happens for the first time within a university campus. The fires affected a large number of people and displaced the ones who lost their homes. It gained the attention of the central government, which attracted media attention, while the story of the ban on abaya was limited to social media networks.

Most importantly, such a discrepancy is due to the fact that the first coverage of the fires promoted the hypothesis of the jinn and included it freely in media publications, while the religious issue did not take a central presence in the matter of banning the abaya in Wad Madani except through the testimony of a student who opposed the ban, saying that the abaya is part of Islamic history.

After comparing the Kassala fires and the ban on abaya stories, one can conclude that the Sudanese media does not completely ignore religious stories but tends to concentrate more on stories that affect a broader group, such as the displacement of the population as a result of the fires in Kassala, versus a specific group of female students at a university in the Gezira State. However, this selective coverage can be interpreted in a negative way, because the case is related to “women,” a group that originally suffers from social marginalisation to a large extent. This also shows in the media coverage of Sudanese girl Amal, who was sentenced to death by stoning. Although this issue is not at the core of religious diversity or freedom, it refers to the method of dealing with issues that the patriarchal mindset considers small-scope problems i.e., that touch a small group in terms of number and impact.

The key issue at hand is the role of TV channels, both public or private, in Sudan. While they are regarded as the primary source of news in the country, the monitoring conducted in two cases studies revealed that television stations tend to overlook religious issues, such as the ban on abaya or the Kassala fires and jinn, instead prioritising official stories or entertainment aspects. It is unclear why these TV channels choose not to cover these stories, and direct communication with them may be necessary to gain insight. From monitoring news bulletins and programmes, it is evident that Sudanese TV channels are more concerned with the activities of the government, particularly the central government, mainly in political and economic contexts, as they primarily cover news about the revolutionary popular movement, Sudan's Sovereignty Council, and the cabinet of ministers.

The Sudanese media's neglect of religious diversity and freedoms may be its most significant challenge, indicating that the sector, both institutions and individuals, requires training, orientation, and possibly restructuring. However, turning to independent media presents a challenging task that necessitates many years of support, field work, and relevant laws.

Conclusion

Comparing media experiences across the three countries is a complex issue. However, the only commonality is that political agendas dominate media institutions, resulting in varying degrees of media independence. In Lebanon and Iraq, parties' influence over media institutions is evident in their editorial policies, while in Sudan, the central government has the final say.

Past challenges have hindered attempts to change or develop these institutions. Nonetheless, vocational training can provide media professionals and workers in these institutions with opportunities for objective work, as seen in some Lebanese experiences despite partisan funding and control.

The experience of alternative or independent media is intriguing, particularly given that modern communication means, which the new media platforms utilise, are not under the control of official or partisan institutions. Supporting and developing these experiences in a country like Sudan could contribute to transforming the media landscape. This presents an opportunity to alter how media outlets address societal issues in general, and religious matters in particular, while financing this new media style can ensure it remains independent of political or religious orientations.

Training journalists independently from their institutions is very challenging. Therefore, efforts should focus on developing media institutions as a whole and providing training to their employees, creating new opportunities for operating freely. This can be achieved through the development of editorial policies and independent financing sources to eliminate external financial, political, or governmental control.

It is impossible to categorise media coverage of religious issues as either objective or subjective as monitoring the way media institutions handle political, economic, or social matters leads to the same outcome, i.e., editorial weakness and external control over the institution's editorial line, among other issues discussed. A more profound problem concerns how the law protects media institutions and their workers, as well as the general work environment for journalists, which is closely tied to funding agencies, often with religious/sectarian affiliation, as seen in Iraq and Lebanon, or dependent on government funding and authority.



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