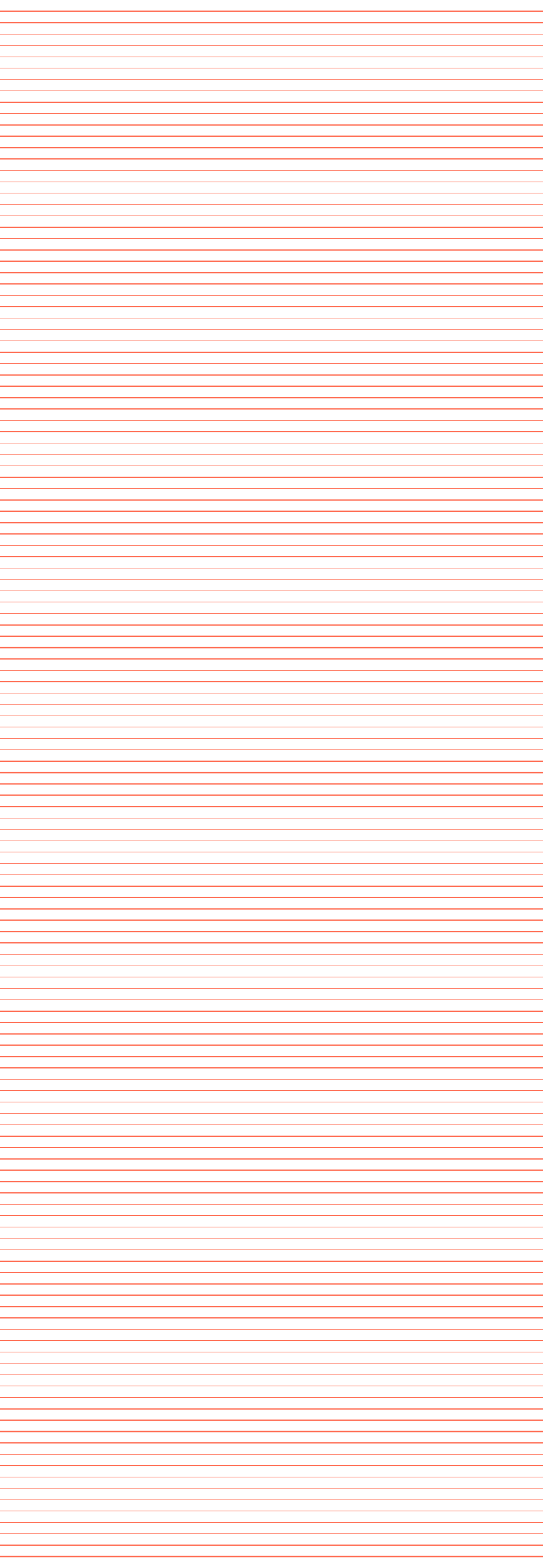


# Journalism, Justice and Reconciliation After Daesh

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## Minutes of MiCT's Iraqi Media Ethics Committee Meeting in Korek Mountain (December 2016)

Media Academy Iraq /  
Media in Cooperation and  
Transition





## Background

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n October 17, 2016, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the beginning of the battle to push the extremist group, the Islamic State – colloquially known as Daesh – out of Mosul and the province of Ninawa. Various state and non-state actors are involved and although the campaign is moving slowly, it seems most likely that sooner or later, Daesh will be forced to leave Ninawa, and eventually Iraq. Many practical questions have been asked as to what happens after Daesh is gone.

Such as: What happens to the locals who are suspected of collaborating with Daesh? How can justice be done, for all the victims of Daesh? How can acts of extra-legal revenge be prevented?

Of course, the Iraqi media plays a role in this process too. A set of questions were proposed as a starting point for discussion with select key players from the Iraqi media sector. This included identifying challenges local media face when covering issues of transitional justice and how local media can best serve the aims of reconciliation.

To encourage discussion and debate on this topic, on Dec. 11, 2016, MiCT hosted a variety of senior editors, media managers and journalists from throughout Iraq at the Korek Mountain resort in Erbil province, Iraqi Kurdistan. The focus of the day-long, closed, roundtable discussion was media ethics after the Islamic State. There were 29 participants from all sectors of Iraqi society, including Kurdish, Sunni and Shia media outlets.

On Jan 14, 2017, MiCT hosted another meeting on transitional justice in Iraq, and impacts on local media. This meeting, attended by 27 participants mainly from within the Kurdistan region as well as representatives from the German Consulate in Erbil, was held at the Media Academy Iraq in Ainkawa, Erbil. The report at hand is a brief summary of the round table meeting December 11, 2016 in Korek Mountain (Kurdistan Iraq).



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ttendees were well aware of the issues the Iraqi media faced, with regard to transitional justice and to credibility as well as their role in an oft-divided society. Most agreed that it was not the media's task to "judge" those who had lived under, or possibly even collaborated with, the Islamic State, or IS, group.

How to prevent this was a more difficult subject. A number of suggestions were made, including a charter, a set of guidelines, more fact-checking and support for a media watchdog organisation. Although it is hard to say whether individual media outlets will act on the suggestions made during the meeting, or whether the Iraqi media will self-regulate in this area, the discussion was a worthwhile one. For MiCT it suggested a number of new, impactful training proposals and doubtless the discussion, fervent at times, had an impact on those attending.

# Minutes of the round table discussion

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The day started with a presentation of research by Yasser al-Tahir of the Media Academy Iraq about perceptions of credibility of Iraqi media outlets, among Iraqi audiences. The final results of this study will be published at a later date.

After a brief discussion on the lack of credibility of Iraqi media Anja Wollenberg opened the main discussion on Iraqi media after the IS group with some questions: How would local journalists deal with the aftermath? Should local media be expected to play a role in reconciliation efforts? How would they cover the Sunni locals who had been living under the IS group? In particular, how would they deal with the Sunni locals who were thought to have collaborated with the IS group?

Some participants felt that more efforts needed to be made by the media toward reconciliation.

A newspaper editor began the discussion by outlining how Sunni Muslims in Iraq had been marginalized in the country by recent Shiite Muslim-led governments. These kinds of identity-led politics had nourished the rise of the extremist group known as the Islamic State and were what had allowed the Islamic State, or IS, group to take control of Mosul initially. Iraqi media needed to criticise the Iraqi government more openly in order to stop this kind of marginalization taking place. The media should also work towards a more inclusive society and to ensure that they also covered the concerns of the country's Sunni Muslims, the editor argued.

"We need to produce stories about how the Sunnis who joined the IS group out of fear, actually need help," another editor said. This editor added that many of the freelance journalists they work with have exhibited a judgmental attitude toward Sunni Muslims living in Mosul. As an editor, it was a constant struggle to restrain that tendency to condemn the people of Mosul.

Many Sunni Muslims and their families were being accused of collaboration with the IS group. Often the





6 accusations were just rumours but they could trigger retaliatory action against select individuals. Acts of revenge were to be expected. The participant noted that some of those calling for revenge against the Sunni Muslims of Mosul had a lot of power and money and that the media tended to support the more powerful in Iraq, when what they should be doing was looking after the interests of the less powerful and in fact, holding the powerful to account.

Another editor felt that Iraqi journalists should focus more on holding the powerful to account: "Local media need to focus on the Iraqi government. The government is the reason that the IS group was able to take control in the areas it did. If the media doesn't try to solve that particular situation, then the same thing will reoccur."

The editor also felt that, because of problems with the agendas of those who paid the bills (a lot of Iraqi media is still funded by political parties or religious institutions; making a profit via advertising has never been a successful business model in post-Saddam Iraq), it was more important to work on training individual journalists to take a more positive and conscientious approach to reporting these topics.

The participant said that many Iraqis needed to understand that in terms of percentages, only a small number of people had deliberately joined the IS group. Others collaborated as a matter of survival.

"It is not the media's job to point the finger. These things should be decided by the Iraqi courts," one editor pointed out, emphasizing that reporters should be instructed to avoid accusatory or judgmental language when working on these issues.

Media outlets needed to work out how best to cover transitional justice issues and reconciliation efforts. More attention should be given to efforts occurring among civil society and cultural groups, one attendee said. There seemed to be widespread support for the idea of producing stories that were about things other than war, violence

or politics. Topics about social and cultural issues were deemed important during this reconciliation process.

"We should focus on both groups, not just those who went to the IS group" one media manager said. "We should also focus on those who were killed by the IS group. The wounds run very deep."

Another participant pointed out that there were some really important stories on reconciliation that were not being covered, and gave several examples.

It was also suggested that the Iraqi media stop giving a platform to clerics who espoused radical ideologies. "They created this problem," said another participant. It was suggested that more media focus should be given to moderate Sunni Muslim clerics who could potentially help to mitigate sectarian tensions.

**MiCT Proposal:** Training on "constructive reporting" and conflict-sensitive reporting – that is, a move away from conflict-driven journalism to a consideration of more positive news, angles and solutions. More consideration may need to be given as to why news outlets are not covering stories about successful transitional events – such as, for example, the Sunni family who risk their lives to help Yazidi girls inside IS-held territory.

The same conscientious reporting techniques needed to be applied to negative aspects of the transitional justice era.

One editor also felt that local media made militias (as opposed to the official Iraqi army) look glamorous and powerful – often unnecessarily, in the name of patriotism, nationalism or sectarianism. "For young men who are bored or unemployed, this starts to look like a very powerful and attractive group," the editor pointed out. Nationalistic urges in reporters needed to be monitored by editors, the attendee said. One academic present suggested that the Iraqi media come together to sign a charter, with regard to coverage of the transitional period and transitional justice issues. More simply, some guidelines could



be developed. These guidelines should also relate to the problem of hate speech and racism in the media.

**MiCT Proposal:** During the meeting, suggestions for guidelines and/or a charter were made and recorded. These have been translated into Arabic and Kurdish and emailed on to all participants for further consideration and suggestions. The suggestions for a charter follow these Minutes on a separate page.

"Not everyone who lived under the IS group was IS," added a participant. "They should not be treated as such by the media."

"We should try and change how certain media outlets are just called Shia or just called Sunni," added another. "I saw a video in Fallujah where Sunnis were being lined up by Shia militias and accused of being IS collaborators - even though there was no proof. This video was simply published by Iraqi media without question."

Participants also suggested that media literacy needed to be improved in Iraq, and there was a short conversation about bringing the topic into Iraqi schoolrooms.

**MiCT proposal:** More training on open source verification, or OSV, including how to set up a check desk and OSV procedures inside a newsroom (something happening increasingly in European newsrooms). Verifying user generated content, which is often sectarian in nature and used for propaganda purposes, is becoming more important than ever as Iraqis get more information from Facebook. There have been several documented instances where misinformation - often described as "fake news" - on Facebook actually caused continuation of conflict. For example, Iraqi journalists worked on a story for Niqash on fighting in the northern town of Tuz Khurmatu headlined: Did Poisonous Social Media Play A Part In Over 60 Deaths In Northern Iraq? Because of disinformation on Facebook, the answer to that question, they concluded, was yes.

There was also a question for further debate. Once again, the participants talked about the need for a media watchdog in Iraq. But once again, it was difficult to know which organization could fill this role.

"I think the government should make tougher laws to deal with media that peddle hate speech," one media manager noted. "In Dubai you can be put in jail for saying the wrong thing."

This question begs further discussion: Can the Iraqi media self-regulate during the transitional justice period? Or should the government legislate against certain types of coverage?

"For example, during a talk show the producers could let guests to the show know what they consider acceptable and what they consider hate speech, and therefore unacceptable," the media manager said. "It would be great to gather up some examples from other countries who have had to deal with issues of transitional justice. It is about helping and advising the media. And this should be a long-term project, not a short term one."

**Proposal:** Host seminars in Iraq for Iraqi media where senior media representatives from other countries who have had to deal with these issues speak about their successes and failures. For example, representatives from South Africa (as a modern example) as well as experts in this era from Germany (as an historic example). Several of the participants thought Germany would be a good example to follow.

# Journalism, Justice and Reconciliation After Daesh

The following guidelines were compiled as a result of discussions on media ethics in Iraq, after the Islamic State. Please feel free to hang it on your newsroom wall, send it as an email, or use it as a basis for further discussion in your newsroom. Please feel free to add further suggestions! Many thanks for your participation.

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- Seek out the positive stories as well as the negative.  
Consider a focus on reconciliation efforts and the efforts of civil society and/or state where possible.
- Pressure both religious and governmental authorities to engage in rehabilitation and (re)-education efforts; support activities by the government in this realm through media coverage.
- Don't just focus on powerful elites; pay attention to average people, citizens and civil society.
- Shed light on the suffering of those that lived under IS control, including Sunnis.
- Promote moderate Sunni clerics and other moderate Sunni forces.
- Prevent hate speech and racism in your media outlet. Avoid broadcasting proponents of hate speech and racism. Ask staff and journalists to consider the issue carefully, and from all sides.
- Check facts and user generated content carefully so as not to spread unfounded rumours about alleged crimes by Sunnis or Shiites.
- Refrain from finger pointing and from spreading allegations against those who allegedly sympathised with the Islamic State group. Report on the prosecution of crimes. But leave the prosecution to the courts.





## Addendum

Participants at Korek Mountain meeting:

Senior representatives from:

Al-Falluja TV

Training centre of Iraqi Media Network

College of Mass Communication at the University  
of Baghdad

NRT TV

Iraqi organization for Growth, Cooperation and Economic  
Development

Media Centre for Training and Consultancy

Al Iraqiya

Al-Mada

Radio al-Mirbad

Al Rashed TV

Al Mashreq

Ashtar TV

Al Falluja TV

Al Ghad FM

Al Rasheed TV

Media Department of Sulaymaniya Polytechnic

KNN TV

Radio Sawa

MiCT

Niqash

