

Dogmatic worldview

European media doubt the legitimacy of the election in Iraq

The day after the elections in Iraq, the European media rejoiced: “Millions of Iraqis defy terrorism”, was the cover story of the **Frankfurter Rundschau** on January 31st, 2005. The headlines of **Süddeutsche Zeitung**, **Handelsblatt**, **Libération**, **Independent** and **Financial Times** read similarly, while the **Guardian** commented on its cover page: “Iraq welcomes the brave new world of democracy.”

Many readers and viewers may have been surprised by those headlines: Only two weeks before the election, the European media had severely questioned its legitimacy and secure organization. They did this in opposition to their colleagues at Arab media organizations, such as **Al Jazeera**, **Al Arabiyah** and **Al-Hayat**, who clearly portrayed the validity of the election more positively. This is the result of a **Media Tenor** analysis of the coverage on the Iraq election in 40 opinion forming media from Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy and Spain, as well as twelve Arab television stations and newspapers in the period between January 16th and 30th, 2005.

European media were primarily guided by the security situation, from which they inferred the degree of legitimacy of the elections in Iraq: 68% of the statements on the election were ambivalent-skeptical to negative during the first week of the analysis (see **graph 1**).

Peter Münch, for example, wrote on January 20th in the **Süddeutsche Zeitung**: “The war lie is followed by the democracy lie.” And the **Guardian** predicted a day after that the elections would be tainted by a severe lack of security, participation and transparency.

German public television news, in particular, suggested through their news selection that the parliamentary elections in Iraq would neither take place on the scheduled date, nor properly fulfil their function. In the week from January 16th until 21st, the television news magazine **heute journal** passed a negative judgment in three quarters of all cases, when the legitimacy of the election was at stake.

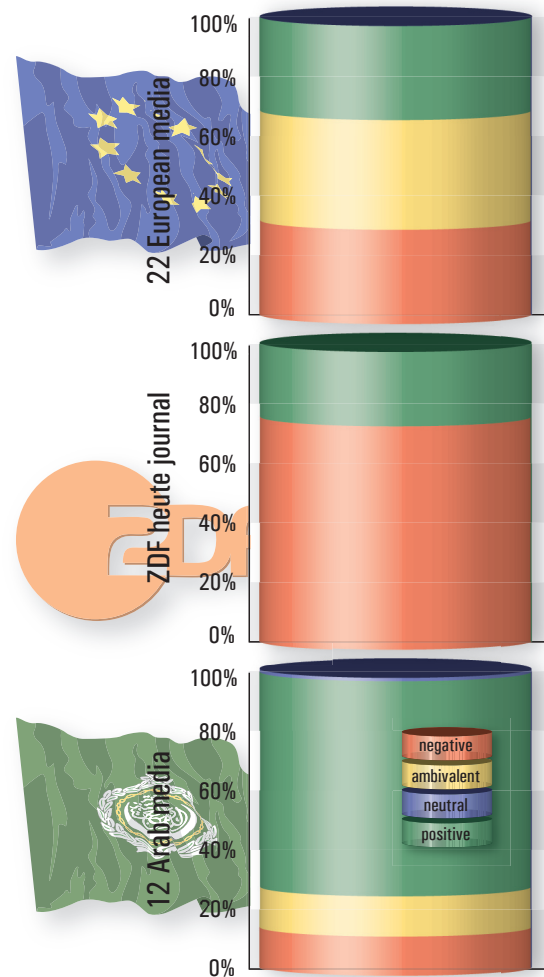
Looking at the attacks in Iraq, the magazine’s anchor, Marietta Slomka, wondered in her lead-in on January 19th: “How can free, equal and universal elections be held under such circumstances?” The correspondent Luc Walpot, in the subsequent news piece, even raised doubts on the premise that

the election was a decision on political objectives: “In view of daily threats, kidnappings, bombs and murders, the interest in election programs is low. (...) It won’t be posters that decide this election, but rather fear.”

Meanwhile, readers and viewers of Arab media received a totally different picture of the situation in Iraq. 71% of all statements on the legitimacy of the ballot vote contained positive evaluations.

The TV station Al-Alam, for example, showed a report on January 19th about demonstrations in Basra, where thousands of Iraqis took to the streets for the elections to be organized on schedule. On the same day, the daily newspaper Al-Hayat quot-

1 Different evaluation



Statements on the legitimacy of the election 01/16-01/21/2005

Source: Media Tenor
01/16 - 01/21/2005

Basis: 54/6/74 statements on
the legitimacy of the election

ed the Kurdish President of the Iraqi parliament, Fouad Masoum, who announced a peaceful cooperation of the different Iraqi parties after the elec-

tions and promised democracy and freedom.

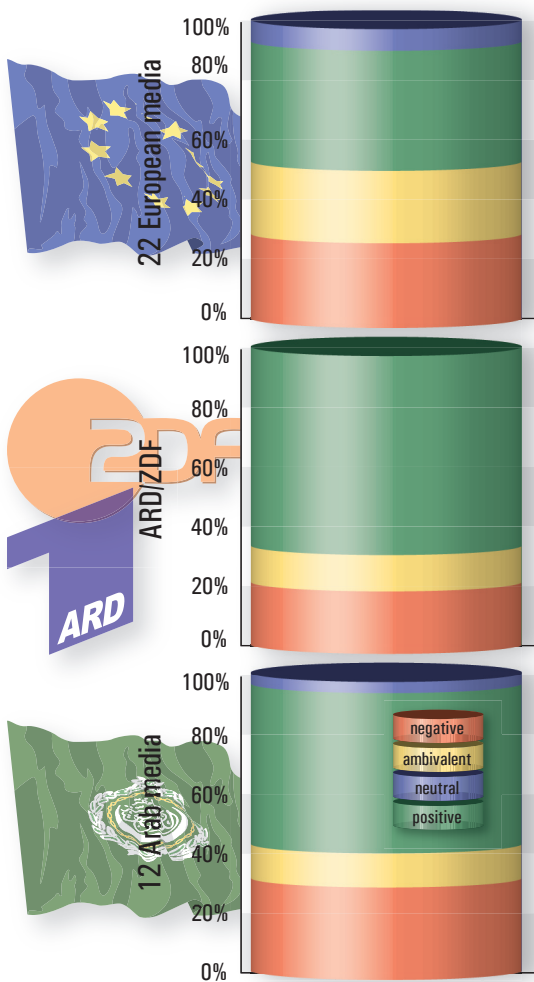
On frequent occasions exiled Iraqis voiced their opinion, saying that the election was a great hope for the future, such as in the news program of the Hisbollah television station, **Al-Manar**, on January 17th. TV stations repeatedly aired appeals by Iraqi politicians, who called for the citizens of Iraq to take part in the elections.

While the European media primarily based their judgment on violence and terror, Arab journalists drew a detailed image of the situation. Not only was the legitimacy of the election addressed more often, but also doubted less. Coverage was more diverse: **Al Jazeera** and the other eleven

the Arab media gave a much greater platform to Iraqis themselves, whether politicians or common citizens. **Graph 3** shows that statements on the election made by Iraqis were just as frequent as those made by the journalists themselves.

In the European media, that relation was 1:3 before the election. The *heute* journal did quote Iraqi sources more often before the election, but those tended to transmit skeptical messages. For instance, two Iraqi voters complained that they did not know who was running for the elections. In any event, they said, most of the politicians were exiled Iraqis, who had come from abroad and did not know the real problems in the country.

2 Change in evaluation



Statements on the legitimacy of the election 01/23-01/30/2005

Source: Media Tenor
01/23 - 01/30/2005

Basis: 425/33/74 statements on
the legitimacy of the election

Arab print and TV media studied, addressed the political objectives of parties, the campaign and the citizens' viewpoints in great detail. Moreover,

Mood swing in the election week

During election week, the tone in Europe's media changed suddenly and noticeably (see **graph 2**). This transformation was especially obvious in the news of the German public television stations. In the week between January 23rd and 30th, two thirds of all statements on the legitimacy of the elections in Iraq were positive in the news magazines *heute* journal and *Tagesthemen*.

ARD and **ZDF** thereby seemed to have adopted the assessment of the Arab TV stations and newspapers that continued to report positively on the election (53% positive statements on the legitimacy). The switch in **ARD** and **ZDF** coverage coincided with a clear increase in the share of Iraqi sources: During the second week of analysis, almost half of all statements (46.6%) were given by Iraqis.

Was public television simply unable to ignore objective reality? Even European journalists could no longer turn a blind eye to the fact that a large part of the Iraqi population was longing for democratic elections and was determined to defy all threats.

On January 27th, the *heute* journal anchor Klaus-Peter Siegloch still wondered in his lead-in: "How can you organize universal, free and fair elections in a country, where even the walk to the polling station may mean death?" But in the subsequent report many Kurdish Iraqis were quoted, who all welcomed the elections and had great hopes for freedom and democracy. One Kurdish woman called the elections, which she "will certainly participate in", the "most important elections of all time."

Coverage in the **ARD Tagesthemen** turned out to be similar. Its anchor Thomas Roth first pointed out that Islamic fundamentalists would try to kill all voters. But the report itself presented almost exclusively joyful and happy exiled Iraqis, who had

tears in their eyes, because they were finally able to cast their votes in Berlin after sometimes long journeys from Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. The overwhelming majority of positive statements on the legitimacy of the election were given by Iraqi voters. Journalists at **ARD** and **ZDF**, however, remained skeptical.

On January 29th, the day before the election, the **Tagesthemen** anchor Anne Will described the atmosphere in Baghdad as one where part of the population would abstain from voting for fear of terror attacks, while others rejected the elections as not free. On the same day, Stefan Hallman speculated in the **heute journal** that the elections in Kirkuk might open up a new front in the violence.

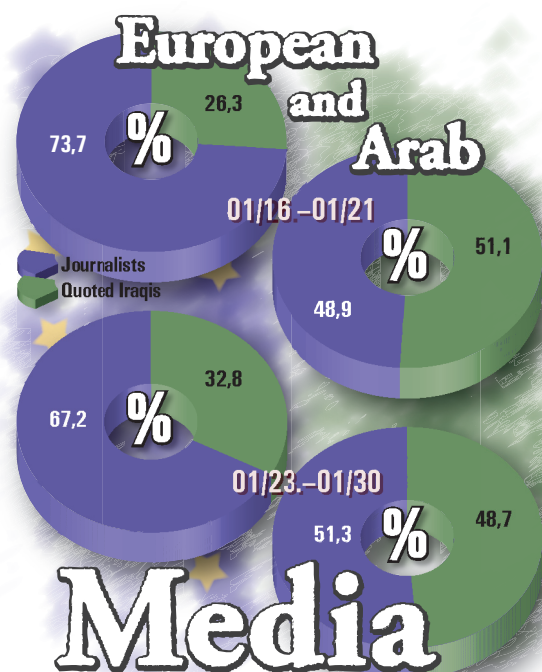
Other European media transmitted a similar image. The fact that almost 40% of the statements on legitimacy were positive during the election week was primarily due to Iraqis, who were quoted on the matter. On January 24th, the **Independent** predicted that the new government would not be legitimate in the eyes of Iraqis, because it would be dependent on US occupation. The same edition, however, disproved that statement by publishing an opinion poll among Iraqis: 10 out of 13 Iraqi citizens, who had been willing to back up their statements with their photographs, welcomed the elections and expressed their hope that they would help defeat the terror and restore peace and stability. The European media representatives were obviously entirely mistaken about the mood within the Iraqi population. This also becomes evident in the choice of external commentators. On January 27th, the Italian newspaper **La Repubblica** quoted the American Bush-opponent George Soros as saying that the election was transformed into a civil war and that it did not serve democracy. And the **Independent** sought out the American lefty Noam Chomsky, who called the prospect of a sovereign, independent and democratic Iraq a "bad joke".

Arab television stations were closer to the pulse of Iraqi voters during the election week. The Lebanese station **LBC**, for example, commented on January 28th that the Iraqi population was enjoying the right to vote.

The European media's election coverage was obviously motivated by their previous criticism of the Iraq war, which had made the election possible in the first place: At no cost could something good come out of evil – the war against Iraq – since that does not fit their view of the world. Yet, dogmatic thinking is hardly appropriate for a comprehensive judgment on current events. Of all

people, it was the Arab journalists who proved to their European colleagues that it is possible to do it differently – the same ones who had also been strictly opposed to the war. rb

3 Close-up: Arab media gave Iraqis broader platform



Sources of assessments on the election

Source: Media Tenor
01/16 – 01/30/2005

Basis: 118/235/758/532 statements on the legitimacy, voter turnout or security aspects of the Iraq election

Basis:

Media: Germany: Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, Handelsblatt, Spiegel, heute journal, Tagesthemen; France: Le Monde, Le Figaro, La Croix, La Tribune, Les Echos, L'Express, TV5, TF1 (20:00); United Kingdom: The Guardian, The Independent, The Times, The Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, BBC1, BBC2; Italy: La Repubblica, Il Messagero, Corriere della Sera, Il Sole 24 Ore, RAI1 TG1, RAI2 TG2, TG5 (20:00)/Canale 5, Italia 1; Spain: El Pais, El Mundo, La Vanguardia, ABC, Cinco Dias, Expansion, TVE1 Noticias (21:00), Antena 3 (20:30), Tele 5; Arab media: Al Hayat, Al-Sharq al Awsat, Al-Quds al-Arabi, Al-Safir, MBC TV, Sahar TV, LBC TV, Al-Ekhbaria TV International, Al Jazeera TV, Al-Arabia TV, Al-Manar TV, Al-Alam TV

Time: 01/16-01/21 and 24.-30.01.2005

Analysis: 2,142 statements referring to the Iraq election (legitimacy, voter turnout or security aspects of the Iraq election)