

# IRAQUEER

عراق کویئر

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**BIASED**

Iraqi Media and the Spread of Anti-LGBT+ Rhetoric



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## BIASED

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The poor state of LGBT+ rights in Iraq is influenced by a number of factors. Chief among them are certain religion and traditional values, which are frequently cited by religious and political figures as justification for discrimination against the LGBT+ community. The effect cascades from there: A lack of LGBT+ resources or education in local languages to counter these narratives allows them to spread widely, and groups across society—from medical professionals to educators to civic leaders—take advantage, scapegoating LGBT+ individuals to promote their agendas or explain away societal ills.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In societies where scientific and social resources about LGBT+ people are absent, media outlets can play a crucial role in shaping public opinion by providing fact-based coverage and holding those who violate the rights of LGBT+ Iraqis accountable. Though Iraqi media outlets have started covering LGBT+ issues in the last 10 years, they are not yet using their platforms to meet these responsibilities. Just the opposite.

The majority of media coverage today is biased against the LGBT+ community, reinforcing discriminatory ideas that LGBT+ individuals are alien to Iraqi society, and that LGBT+ identities are ailments that must be treated and eradicated. This report will explore how anti-LGBT+ media coverage serves as hate speech against LGBT+ individuals, stifling their march toward equality and inspiring—and passively condoning—violence against them.

# METHODOLOGY

For this report, IraQueer searched the websites of more than 60 Iraqi media outlets including newspapers, TV networks, and online platforms using keywords including “homosexuality” (“Al Methliya Al Jinsiya”) and “sexual abnormality” (“Al Shuthuth Al Jinsi”) as such terms are the ones that are commonly used by media outlets when speaking about LGBT+ people. The search results that are used in this study are of those media coverage between the years 2012 and May 31st, 2020. IraQueer’s search results led to collecting 208 news items from the 60 Iraqi media outlets. We have conducted a general content analysis for articles, news segments, and TV programs that talked about LGBT+ people to better understand their role in shaping public opinion about the LGBT+ community. Additionally, since, according to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, more than 92% of Iraqis get their information from television channels, we highlight 22 TV programs and news segments and study them as a representative sample of and take a deep dive into the different aspects of their coverage of the LGBT+ community. These 22 programs have been chosen because they are the most recent as they were produced between 2016 and 2020. Finally, we rely on publications produced by scholars, human rights organizations, and other relevant experts to be able to draw conclusions that are credible and fact based.





Screenshot of Biladi TV

Based on the search results from IraQueer's online research, the media in Iraq did not start covering topics related to LGBT+ people until the end of 2009. The rare coverage at that point was mainly as a reaction to human rights organizations highlighting the killings of LGBT+ Iraqis during what's known as the "emo killing campaigns" and other organized killing campaigns. The coverage was mainly in written media and primarily focused on translating articles published in international media outlets. This continued to be the case until 2013 and 2014 when LGBT+ individuals and allies started to organize and became more visible.

## IRAQI MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY

For the past five years, Iraqi media became more influential in shaping the discourse around LGBT+ people and shaping the public opinion towards those who are perceived to be or identify as LGBT+. In fact, Iraqi media's coverage of the LGBT+ community goes as far as shaping LGBT+ people's opinions of themselves. In a study conducted by IraQueer in 2018, 89% of LGBT+ respondents shared that the media coverage in Iraq has negatively impacted the way they perceive their queer identities.

Additionally, the nature of the media coverage shifted from mainly translating articles published internationally to locally produced articles and TV shows that vilify LGBT+ people. Our analysis of the search results found that the overwhelming majority of the media coverage was biased against the LGBT+ community, encouraging people to reject such identities. On many occasions, the coverage went as far as calling for the elimination of LGBT+ people from society to "protect" innocent children and youth who are "easily influenced".

## المثلية في العراق.. ظاهرة أم مرض؟



Screenshot of Al-Alam Al-Jadeed

# WRITTEN MEDIA

Written media was the primary source of LGBT+ coverage until recent years. This includes newspapers and websites that primarily translated articles like those published around the appointment of the United Nations' Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in 2016, and different articles regarding the passing of marriage equality in different countries in recent years, to articles that are written by local journalists.

Similarly, the amount of articles covering LGBT+ people has dramatically increased in the last two years reacting more to the work organizations like IraQueer do, raising rainbow flags by different embassies in Baghdad, and blaming LGBT+ people for the spread of the coronavirus. The overwhelming majority of these articles have portrayed LGBT+ people negatively.

Al-Ebaa Network published a statement released by the Iraqi Parliament Member Habib Al-Tarafi reacting to the United Kingdom embassy in Erbil, Iraq raising the rainbow flag during LGBT+ Pride month in June 2017. The Parliament member stated, "If an embassy in my city raised this flag, I would have burnt the embassy."

Al-Sumariyah News published a statement in September 2017 by Qaes Al-Khazali, the leader of Asaeb Ahl Al-Haq, a group responsible for many of the killing campaigns against LGBT+ individuals. In his statement, Al-Khazali states, "There are people who work on spreading sexual abnormality in the Iraqi society with the support of the United States. We will defend the culture and identity of this country with the support of our religion and beliefs." Similarly, they released a statement in 2018 by Muqtada Al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadr political party, formerly an armed militia responsible for LGBT+ murders between 2006 and 2012, which stated, "Homosexuals struggle with mental disorders and internal pressure that result in resorting to negative actions like wearing women's clothes instead of men's, and they are mentally ill."

Al-Shafaq News published a statement in March 2020 from Jawad Al-Khalisi; a religious leader who reacted to IraQueer's work around the right to life and Iraq's acknowledgement of that right by saying "Religious leaders should condemn the work of IraQueer, and should call to expel the British and American ambassadors from Iraq."

## في العراق الثائر ضد الفساد.. قضايا شذوذ وعنف واحتيال وازديواج جنسية تلاحق رأس المؤسسة العسكرية

طباعة المقالة

التعليقات



Al-Zawraa News, a daily newspaper, published an article in 2016 that used the term “fourth sex” to refer to gender non-conforming individuals. The article was titled “The Fourth Sex, One of the Strange Things in Our Times.” The article goes on to define the fourth sex as “a living creature that combines the characteristics of men and women in regards to appearance, behavior, and sexual orientation.”

The Iraqi Media Network used the terms “abnormal”, “shemale” and “prostitution” when talking about LGBT+ people. An op-ed written in 2016 by the writer Insam Al-Shalji stated, “Daring online pages for homosexuals and sexual deviants exist where they post their photos and phone numbers.”

Iraq Newspaper; an online newspaper, published an article titled “An important statement by the Iraqi Council of Ministers regarding the sexually deviant’s organization in Iraq” in which they attack IraQueer and deny the acceptance of LGBT+ people in Iraq.

The anti-LGBT+ narrative continues to be presented by these outlets. In recent years however, certain writers and alternative media outlets have tried to offer more neutral coverage.

Rudaw’s English section occasionally offered the opportunity for LGBT+ activists and individuals to share their story. The most recent article was an opinion editorial talking about the backlash that was caused by European Union and other embassies raising the rainbow flag in Baghdad, and it was written by IraQueer’s founder, Amir Ashour. But this article represents an example of a very limited media coverage in written media outlets where LGBT+ people are sharing their own story, or are portrayed in neutral or positive ways.







## السفارتان البريطانية والأمريكية تروجان لفيروس " الشذوذ الجنسي " مشاريع خطيرة تستهدف القيم والأخلاق وتروج الفساد في العراق

Screenshot of Anwar TV

## Television

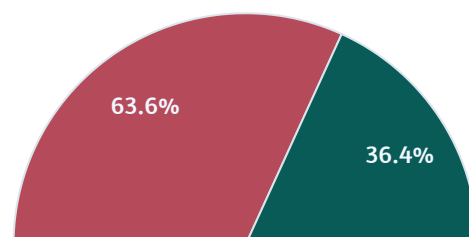
The most influential media coverage in Iraq was produced by TV channels, as 92% of Iraqis get their information from TV according to the 2017 report by The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG).

For the purpose of this study, we have selected 22 TV programs and segments that are produced by 16 television channels to take a deeper dive into these programs and understand their coverage of the LGBT+ community. A list of the programs and TV channels is provided at the end of this report.

Out of the 22 programs that have been selected, 14 of them were produced between November 2019 and May 31st, 2020. This shows a massive increase in the number of the programs that talk about LGBT+ people.

While it was difficult to obtain reliable data that show the number of viewers each TV channel and program have, the 16 channels we are focused on have a combined total of more than 20 million followers on social media. Given the fact that only 48% of Iraqis use the internet according to the Internet World Stats, while 92% of Iraqis receive their information from television channels, the reach of these programs through TV channels can potentially be double their reach on social media.

In order to better understand the impact of the 22 programs, we have conducted analysis focusing on four different aspects of each of these programs. These aspects are, the overall program structure and design which focuses on the use of visuals, music, and length of each program. The second aspect is the hosts, the guests, and their profiles and claims. This highlights the background of the hosts and the angle they take, the guests, their qualifications, and the claims the guests make regarding LGBT+ people. The third aspect focuses on terminology, the words used by the speakers and hosts when talking about and to LGBT+ people. And the final aspect highlights the source of information relied on by the speakers.





ماذا لو تحولت السفارات الى منصات ترويج للمثلية؟

ماذا لو؟

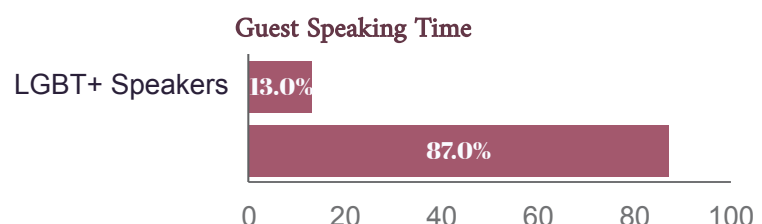
Screenshot of Al-Ahad TV

## Program Structure and Design

Almost all the programs and news segments had a haunted house-like music playing while talking about LGBT+ identities. Some of them even added extra dangerous sounding music, like the sound of a bomb after any statement they deemed to be “controversial” and was made by an LGBT+-identifying person. Such music played after statements like, “I am gay,” “I want to kiss another boy,” and “Humans become aware of their sexuality when they are younger.” Similarly, some of the programs even filmed their episodes and interviewed LGBT+ people in abandoned warehouses, dark alleys, and other suspicious-looking environments.

The use of music during the program has proven to have an impact on people’s perception of the work. Scholars like the late Stuart Fischhoff highlight how music works on the unconscious mind. He states. “Music plays upon our emotions. It is generally a non- intellectual communication. The listener does not need to know what the music means, only how it makes him feel.” This shows that the selection of “dangerous” music is not random. Rather, it aims to make the viewer feel a certain way, and in this case, it is fear that these programs want the viewer to feel.

Additionally, out of the 777 minutes which is the total duration of the 22 TV segments analyzed, only 103 minutes of the time was dedicated to LGBT+ speakers, 33 minutes of which were given by Al-Sharqiya TV in the shows Malafat Muharama 2017, and Al- Jumhuriyah Al Sadisa 2020. More than half of the programs did not dedicate a single minute to LGBT+ speakers. This means that on average, LGBT+ speakers got less than 5 minutes of speaking time, comparing to nearly 31 minutes to speakers who not only do not identify as LGBT+, but are also anti-LGBT+ people.



## Hosts, Guests, and Their Claims

Hosts and “expert” guests often started the shows detailing the reasons why one becomes LGBT+. The reasons they listed included hormonal abnormality, birth defects, mental illness, families and lack of parental guidance, rape and sexual abuse, and disconnection from religion. Hosts’ questions ranged from “Why do people become this way?” to “How do we solve these problems?”, which is to say they portray the LGBT+ community as a threat to the structure of Iraqi society that needs to be remedied. Through such questions, the media is implicitly taking the position in which they believe that homosexuality is an illness, and their objective is to prove or reinforce this theory through their coverage.

Additionally, many of the “experts” expressed how they perceive LGBT+ people as deviant individuals who are “controlled by temporary lust” that could potentially develop into an addiction should the individual continue choosing to express and practice their “abnormal” sexual orientations. The idea that being LGBT+ is natural was not considered even once. In fact, they repeatedly used words like crime, sin, and outsiders to convey the idea that being LGBT+ is not a part of the Iraqi identity.

Many of them even claimed that the number of homosexuals has increased since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, casting them as victims of foreign campaigns to promote homosexuality and destroy Iraqi society’s moral foundation. But also often contradicting themselves by saying that the rights of these groups do not need to be addressed since Iraq has so few of them.

Furthermore, LGBT+ rights activists and allies continue to be attacked by the media as they are referred to as “more dangerous than terrorists” who should be held accountable for endangering the youth and other vulnerable groups in the society. In several interviews, Ahmed Al-Sahhaf; the spokesperson of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs has called for legal actions to be taken against groups like IraQueer.

Naturally, by agreeing that reasons for homosexuality and other non-conforming sexual orientations are all societal ailments, the guests and hosts try to explore potential solutions. These solutions ranged from better parenting skills to better efforts from governmental and religious institutes to “reintegrate” the youth into society after “treating” them. The words “treatment” and “preventions” were used a total of 188 times, while words like criminals and punishment were used 134 times. 100% of their solutions were anti-LGBT+ people as none of them considered the possibility that being LGBT+ is not a problem.

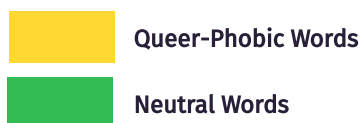
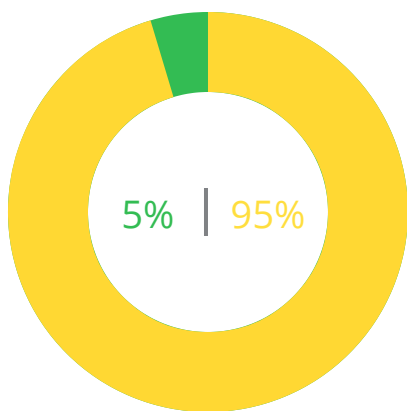
*Screenshot of Al-Ayam TV*







## مرجع ديني يتحدث عن "فاحشة وشذوذ" ويدعو لطرده سفيرين من العراق



### Terminology

When referring to LGBT+ people, the overwhelming majority of the words used to describe them were negative. Words like “faggot,” “sinner,” “abnormal,” “mentally ill,” “outcast,” “lustful,” and “prostitutes” were used to refer to LGBT+ people. These words are often used to voice moral disapproval toward these identities. These offensive words were used a total of 1574 times. This means at least one of these negative words was used every 30 seconds on average during the 22 programs analyzed.

More neutral words like “the LGBT+ community” and “gay” were only used 98 times, and mostly in a negative context in which speakers used phrases like “gays or what’s known as sexually abnormal individuals.” The use of negative terms pushes the public to associate LGBT+ people with offensive adjectives, therefore making it harder for advocates to change public opinions as the language the public understands is inherently negative. As previously highlighted, this has also impacted the mental health of LGBT+ people the majority of whom were negatively impacted by the media coverage.

**A queer-phobic  
word was used  
every 30 seconds**



## Sources

Our analysis found that hosts and guests often rely on questionable sources and convey inaccurate information to the public. Many of them use the phrase “recent international studies state” to justify their opinions and mislead their audiences to believe that they are relying on science when they never reference a specific study, while some go further and manufacture and misrepresent facts. The nationally respected therapist Saeed Al Aathami told Dijla TV in 2018 that the World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes homosexuality as a mental disorder. That is inaccurate information; the WHO removed homosexuality from its International Classification of Diseases in 1992, 26 years prior to Al Aathami’s statement.

Similarly, the host of the program Malafat claimed that there was a study that proved that LGBT+ marriage is temporary while heterosexual marriages last for a lifetime. And the most recent example is when the spokesperson for the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs misquoted IraQueer in March 2020 when he said that Iraq did not recognize LGBT+ people and that LGBT+ people do not have a place in the Iraqi society, referring to IraQueer’s statement regarding Iraq’s recent recognition of the right to life regardless of one’s sexual orientation.

Such misrepresentation of facts is dangerously misinforming the public and misleading the Iraqi people. The narrative is twisted to promote the rejection of LGBT+ people in Iraq and normalize violence committed against them. Scholars like Greg Philo and Catherine Happer from Glasgow University state: “The information that people are given in media accounts can both legitimize the actions of the powerful and facilitate change at the collective level.” In this case, the Iraqi government, being the source of law and power, is actively inciting anti- LGBT+ violence through their public aggression against LGBT+ citizens relying on their personal beliefs, and neglecting Iraq’s legal obligations under national and international laws to protect its citizens.

These beliefs and views often went unchallenged as the majority of the programs did not host guests that had different points of views, and in the rare occasion when they hosted LGBT+ speakers, the majority of them were coming from disadvantaged backgrounds lacking the educational skills, the financial stability, and the political and social protection. This made it difficult for these speakers to challenge speakers like religious leaders, politicians, and therapists all of whom enjoy a certain level of privilege and protection that enables them to confidently share their beliefs.

*Screenshot of Al-Sharqiya TV*





Screenshot of Al-Sharqiya TV

## Glimmers of Hope

Despite all these negative aspects to the programs and the larger media coverage, there are still a few positive signs that could be the beginning of better media practices and coverage of LGBT+ topics. Despite the security risks, one can argue that the increased level of coverage is a positive sign that LGBT+ people are being slowly recognized.

The use of the Arabic word “Mujtamaa Al-Meem”, which translates to the LGBT+ community, has been notably higher than when it was first used in 2017 by IraQueer during an interview with Al-Sharqiya TV. In fact, even more conservative channels have used the term. They often used it in a negative context, but it is used nonetheless.

Additionally, while Al-Sharqiya is far from meeting professional standards of journalism, comparing to other channels, they have offered LGBT+ speakers the largest amount of speaking time, and had a relatively more neutral coverage. Alternative and online media platform had some attempts to provide better coverage, but they are yet to balance the impact mainstream media has.

***"The government should listen to all citizens."***

***— Arshad Al-Salehy, Deputy President of the Iraqi Human Rights Commission***

Lastly, speakers like Arshad Al-Salehy, the Deputy President of the Iraqi Human Rights Commission, who said that the government should listen to all citizens, and the legal expert Tareq Harb, who refuted the fact that raising the rainbow flag by the European Union was illegal, as promoted by several Iraqi politicians and most major political parties. While neither one of them made statements in support of LGBT+ citizens, in fact, Tareq Harb regularly stated that that act (raising the rainbow flag) was immoral, it was important for the speakers and the viewers to receive legally accurate information.



*Screenshot of Al-Ghadeer TV*

## Conclusion

To be sure, the media in Iraq does not take sole responsibility for the oppression of the Iraqi LGBT+ community. Many other factors, including the education system, political and social instability, and religious and tribal values, make it hard if not impossible for the LGBT+ community in Iraq to exist.

That being said, the media in Iraq generally are not meeting their responsibilities. Most notably, TV channels have been systematically promoting hate speech and violence against members of the LGBT+ community in Iraq. Despite the increase in the use of more neutral words like “homosexuals” in the last year, Iraqi media outlets have not shown a noticeable will to challenge the narrative they are offering. On the contrary, they have often provided militia leaders like Al Khazali and Muqtada Al Sadr with a platform to spread and inspire anti- LGBT+ campaigns. In fact, Al-Ahd TV is run by Asaeb Ahl Al-Haq, which is an armed militia that under the leadership of Al-Kazali has organized numerous killing campaigns targeting LGBT+ people. These channels continue to offer politicians the opportunity to spread inaccurate and contradicting information to Iraqis. Ahmed Al-Sahhaf’s denial of the right to life for LGBT+ people contradicts the fact that the Iraqi government recognized this right for all regardless of their sexual orientation in a submission to the United Nation’s Human Rights Committee.

This clear biased coverage threatens the LGBT+ movement as it alienates potential LGBT+ sympathizers. Even those who identify as LGBT+ will have a harder time being open about it. When LGBT+ individuals feel disempowered and unsupported, LGBT+ civic organizing and the equality movement will suffer too, as it will be unlikely for individuals to join when their lives could be at stake. Information shared by the media can limit and shape the behavior of individuals who are central to wider social change.

Similarly, many scholars highlight the relationship between policy adoption and media coverage. Even though the media’s role is not fully linked to policy adoption, they still can potentially impact policy adoption at least through shaping public opinions.

Scholars like Roddrick Colvin state in his research. “States that adopt LGBT+ friendly policies show a higher percentage of positive newspaper articles than negative articles. Positive media coverage should help to get the issue on the legislative agenda in an adoptable form.

# Five Things Iraqi Journalists Can Do To Improve LGBT+ Reporting

1

**PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM STANDARDS:** Serve as a neutral platform to inform the public about reliable and updated information instead of relying on personal belief and inaccurate information.

2

**TERMINOLOGY:** Use neutral and respectful terms when referring to LGBT+ people including gays, LGBT+ people, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and others. Do not use offensive words like “faggots”, “mentally ill”, and others that are highlighted in this report. Such terms are both inaccurate and reveal a clear bias that put journalist integrity in question.

3

**NO LEADING QUESTIONS:** Rely on open ended questions like “What and How” questions that allow you to get more accurate information from your guests, instead of relying on “Yes and No” questions that can potentially reveal your bias and lead your guests towards a certain conclusion. Similarly, be open to the possibility that being LGBT+ is not an illness especially since all international medical agencies agree that homosexuality is not an illness or a disorder.

4

**CHOOSE THE RIGHT EXPERTS:** Host experts with relevant and reliable experiences including human rights activists, gender and sexuality scholars, and therapists. And understand that while religion is an important part of the Iraqi society, religious leaders do not hold the relevant qualifications that enable them to speak about human sexuality.

5

**BE NEUTRAL:** Dedicate more time to LGBT+ speakers who can best speak about their identities, and share their side of the story.



## A List of the 22 Reviewed Shows

- Al Jumhuriyah Al Sadisa - Al-Sharqiya TV - May 2020
- Sa'a Khabariyah - Al-Iraqiya TV - May 2020
- Mn Baghdad - Al-Taghieer TV - May 2020
- Fiqh Al Mustafa - Forat TV - May 2020
- Al-Malaf - Al-Ghadeer TV - May 2020
- Sahra Ramdhaniyah - Al-Ghadeer TV - May 2020
- A Special Program - Al-Ayam TV - May 2020
- Matha Law - Al-Ahad TV - March 2020
- Wa Lana Raye - Anwar TV - March 2020
- News Segement - Al-Ahad TV - March 2020
- A Special Report - Biladi TV - March 2020
- Ma'a Rafif Al-Hafidh - iNews TV - February 2020
- Post - Asia TV - February 2020
- Jura'a Wa'ee - Afaq TV - February 2019
- News Segment - Afaq TV - 2018
- Malafat - Dijla TV - 2017
- Malafat Muharama - Al-Sharqiya TV - July 2017
- +18 - Dijla TV - March 2017
- Lagal Ranj - Rudaw TV - 2017
- Special Report - Rudaw TV - June 2017
- Mn Al-Waqee - Hona Baghdad TV - August 2016
- Al-Hawa Elak - Al-Sumariya TV - March 2016

# About Us

# IRAQUEER

عراق كوير

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**IraQueer** is Iraq's first and only national LGBT+ organization. It was founded in March 2015, and has since gained international recognition through its work around education, advocacy, and providing direct services for LGBT+ Iraqis. For more information, visit IraQueer's website: [www.iraqueer.org](http://www.iraqueer.org) and follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn.

This report was done in collaboration with another Iraqi organization that chose to remain anonymous for security reasons.

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