

Istanbul Declaration

Dialogue on Media and Conflict in Iraq

14-16 May 2008 | Istanbul, Turkey

An international group of media executives, experts and government officials from Iraq as well as media executives and experts from the region met in Istanbul May 14-16 to discuss the impact of the continuing conflict on the media in Iraq and the impact of the Iraqi and regional Arabic media on the conflict. Concerned by the violence but determined to try to carry out their professional duties, they reached the following conclusions, which should prove feasible within the next five years:

I. OVERALL GOALS AND MECHANISMS: Despite the ongoing conflict, the regional and Iraqi media should aim to

1. Serve the needs of the Iraqi public in relation to information, education and entertainment
2. Produce and publish in accordance with international standards and the Iraqi constitution*
3. Provide an accurate and balanced picture of events in Iraq while avoiding incitement of violence

In order to achieve these goals, Iraq will need to

1. Adopt the non-binding Professional Code of Conduct completed in Amman in March 2008, inclusive of all forms of media, and establish an independent advisory committee to prevent incitement
2. Implement dissemination and training programs to raise awareness of the code in the media community
3. Revise regulations relating to Iraqi government advertising expenditures so that they are distributed according to objective criteria
4. Require public disclosure of funding sources for media organizations

II. ENTERTAINMENT: In order to present a more genuine Iraqi perspective and create a culture of peace, non-violence, equality, tolerance and confidence in the future, the environment for production of entertainment programming within Iraq needs to be improved by

1. Creating a privately funded Media Support Foundation for production of indigenous entertainment programming
2. Launching an Iraq-owned satellite as a joint public-private partnership
3. Passing the legislation necessary to create a media city in Baghdad
4. Reversing the brain drain in the media industry, bringing back to Iraq media professionals

III. NEWS MEDIA: All Iraqis have suffered terribly from ongoing violence in Iraq. News journalists are especially vulnerable in the execution of their professional responsibilities. It is imperative to

1. Improve protection for news journalists by
 - a. Strengthening the capacity and legitimacy of professional journalists' unions and associations
 - b. Encouraging media organizations to provide adequate protection, training and benefits for employees

- c. Requiring effective police investigations of violence against journalists and their families, as well as compensation for their families and enacting legal punishment against the perpetrators
- 2. Ensure objectivity, balance and transparency by
 - a. Providing training on professional standards
 - b. Guaranteeing equal and free access to public information
- 3. Work to strengthen media independence by
 - a. Passing laws for a more independent Iraqi Media Network and for independent licensing and regulation of broadcast media
 - b. Educating the government institutions, especially the security forces, about the rights of citizens in general and journalists in particular
- 4. Project an Iraqi perspective on the news by
 - a. Expanding and developing independent Iraqi news agencies to feed the Iraqi and international media
 - b. Encouraging regional and international media to rely more on credible Iraqi sources
 - c. Increasing the credibility and quality of Iraqi news sources

IV. CITIZEN AND NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGY: The Internet, text messaging and blogging open opportunities, even in the current conflict situation, to

- 1. Exploit the potential of new media to convey information from the people to government authorities and vice versa
 - a. Providing computers in schools and internet cafes
 - b. Developing education and training courses on how to use the internet both for self-expression and income generation
 - c. Encouraging free individual Internet usage by requiring telecommunications companies to divide revenues with internet service providers, as currently done in several Arab countries
- 2. Improve access for seldom-heard voices, especially women, residents of rural areas and the full range of cultures represented in Iraq by
 - a. Creating safe spaces for dialogue and mobilization
 - b. Educating citizens on their rights and responsibilities with respect to freedom of expression

Iraq needs a partnership between a government committed to freedom of expression and media committed to responsible use of the means of communication. Such a partnership is one essential element to enable both media and government to weather the current difficult environment and look forward to peace.

*Some participants want amendments to the current Iraqi constitution, in accordance with the established procedures.