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Developing a Media Model for Mitigating the Consequences of Human Rights Violations in Iraq

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This study aimed to identify the dimensions and components of a media model for mitigating the consequences of human rights violations in Iraq. Data were comprehensively collected from Iraq's media and social platforms, and the analyses were conducted considering the country's specific sociopolitical context. The central research question was: What are the dimensions and components of an effective media model to reduce the consequences of human rights violations in post-Saddam Iraq? The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design using the grounded theory approach. The statistical population consisted of faculty members from Iraqi universities specializing in media, communication, human rights, international relations, and political science in 2024. A sample of 13 participants was selected using purposive sampling and based on the principle of theoretical saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using three-stage coding (open, axial, and selective coding). The findings resulted in a model comprising six main categories: causal conditions (macro-environmental dynamics; legal drivers, political drivers, military and social drivers), contextual conditions (ideological deviation; systemic inefficiency, soft repression, political suffocation), intervening conditions (structural fracture; lack of restructuring, absence of promotional justice, lack of discursive consensus), strategies (media awareness and development of media literacy; online platforms, online reporting, online campaigns, digital content production, media networking, media storytelling), consequences (improvement of international image; promotion of freedom, enhancement of civil society participation, fundamental reforms, and facilitation of comprehensive capacity-building), and the core category (human rights violations; intolerance toward minorities, lack of central mechanisms, absence of oversight mechanisms, and disrespect for individual rights). The results indicated that media, as an influential bridge between public opinion and social and political institutions, plays a crucial role in shaping human rights discourse and fostering societal transformation.

Keywords: media model, media awareness, human rights violations, consequences, Iraq.

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1. Introduction

Human rights comprise a set of entitlements and freedoms to which every person is entitled by birth without discrimination based on race, gender, religion, belief, nationality, economic status, or other grounds. These rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, aiming to

preserve values and respect human dignity. They are enshrined in international instruments such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and are implemented based on internationally recognized standards and principles (Hosseini & Rahayi, 2024). The fundamental purpose of these rights is to enhance respect for humanity, protect every individual from abuse, and guarantee life with autonomy and dignity.

Over recent decades, human rights have emerged as a dominant global discourse, drawing significant attention from states and international organizations (Azadi, 2024). Although human rights issues have long been present in international relations, their recognition at the global level began after World War II, when certain principles were reflected in the Charter of the United Nations and further reinforced by the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on December 10, 1948 (Bloomfield, 2016). Following the establishment of the United Nations, human rights acquired a prominent position within the international community, as countries and organizations, through various treaties, declared their commitment to international human rights standards. Many of these standards were considered binding even as customary rules of international law before the adoption of formal human rights treaties (Shayanfar, 2023).

Human rights, as a fundamental framework for collective human existence, create a profound and non-negotiable obligation for states and the global community to ensure, protect, and effectively implement these principles. Any action or policy contrary to human rights—particularly when systematic and widespread—constitutes a grave violation and requires a collective response from the international community, civil institutions, and the media to counteract its destructive effects (Gholizadeh, 2023). Organized violations of fundamental freedoms, including political repression, structural discrimination, intolerance of intellectual or identity diversity (religious, ethnic, cultural), and the forced silencing of dissent, not only institutionalize injustice but also play a pivotal role in fueling cycles of violence (Amani et al., 2023). At the same time, it must be recognized that even within democratic systems governed by the rule of law, there is always a risk that security, political, or social considerations—sometimes under the pretext of temporary necessity—can lead to disproportionate

restrictions on human rights. Thus, continuous oversight by independent institutions, sustained social dialogue, and corrective legal mechanisms are essential to balance state authority and individual freedoms. National and human security, both domestically and internationally, can only be guaranteed if founded on respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Brutger & Strezhnev, 2017).

In Iraq, the human rights landscape has faced profound challenges. This study is based on a careful analysis of Iraq's conditions over the past two decades, with examples and insights drawn directly from the country's media, social, and political realities (Isakhan, 2020).

The media, as one of the microstructures of society, exerts significant influence in shaping public culture. It can mobilize and organize human rights activists and other social advocates, empowering them and transforming their efforts into a broader public movement (Fraser, 1999). In recent years, media have played a critical role in advancing civil and political rights; some outlets have become vital educational platforms for human rights advocacy (Haj Mohammadi, 2022). Unfortunately, certain media have also disseminated anti-human rights messages, consciously or unconsciously contributing to the spread of dehumanizing ideologies. Media have a crucial responsibility to convey the spirit of national dialogue and demonstrate the degree to which citizens demand democracy and rights (Alquraan & Aduse, 2022). However, media can also contribute to human rights violations by spreading misinformation or justifying violence and discrimination against specific groups. For example, during the Ba'athist regime, state-controlled media were used to incite hatred against Kurds, Shiites, and other minorities (Baram, 1991). Additionally, broadcasting hate speech or violent imagery can provoke aggression among different social groups (Shoja et al., 2023).

The role of media in either safeguarding or undermining human rights becomes especially critical in fragile political and security contexts such as Iraq (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2021). On the one hand, media can act as a vehicle for raising public awareness about human rights; reporting and analyzing human rights abuses can inform citizens and exert pressure on governments and relevant institutions. In Iraq, media can play a vital role in covering issues

concerning minority communities, including Kurds, Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Turkmen, and Yazidis (Human Rights, 2020). Yet this coverage is sometimes shaped by political or ethnic biases, which may intensify racism and conflict among minority groups (Shukri Bafragerd, 2023).

Conversely, media can defend freedom of expression and press independence. For instance, several Iraqi media organizations work to protect journalists from harassment and intimidation (Abbasi Ashlaghi & Norouzi Firouz, 2018). They can also promote understanding and dialogue among different groups to support peace and reconciliation. Some Iraqi outlets, for example, have attempted to create platforms for dialogue among Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds (David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2022). Ultimately, the media's role in Iraq's human rights environment is complex and multifaceted: it can both contribute to rights violations and foster their protection. Therefore, it is crucial that media be used responsibly to promote peace, mutual understanding, and respect for human rights (Amani et al., 2023).

The points mentioned above illustrate how media activities can influence human rights violations and mitigate their consequences. Yet, there is a clear lack of a comprehensive model addressing how media can systematically reduce the impacts of human rights violations. Based on the review of existing research, no prior study has thoroughly developed a media model aimed at mitigating the consequences of human rights violations in Iraq. Addressing this gap offers novelty and significance. This research seeks to propose a structured media-based model to reduce the adverse effects of human rights violations in post-Saddam Iraq. Free and independent media can fulfill their cultural function by reflecting critical political and social issues related to human rights. Moreover, they hold potential and face challenges in building cultural discourse consensus across divergent and sometimes conflicting views on human rights, and they can assist in moderating conditions and reforming behaviors that oppose human rights in society. Therefore, this study answers the question: *What is the effective media model for mitigating the consequences of human rights violations in post-Saddam Iraq?*

2. Theoretical Foundations

Developmental Media Theory: This theory, proposed by McQuail and other media scholars, argues that media in developing countries must play an active role in democratic processes, social advancement, and human development. According to this theory, the media should not only report events but also contribute to shaping public discourse, promoting civic literacy, and combating inequality (McQuail, 2010). This aligns with the article's perspective that media can be used as an instrument to mitigate the consequences of human rights violations.

Foucault's Discourse Theory: Foucault views the media not merely as channels of information but as integral parts of power structures that produce and reproduce "truth" and systems of knowledge. From this perspective, the media can decisively influence the protection or violation of human rights through how they represent groups such as minorities, protesters, and women (Foucault, 1980). This theory explains how, under authoritarian or corrupt regimes, media can become tools to legitimize human rights abuses.

Media Watchdog Theory: This theory emphasizes the media's monitoring and controlling role vis-à-vis political power. Free media, by investigative reporting and applying public pressure, can prevent human rights violations and institutionalize accountability (Norris, 2010). In fragile contexts such as Iraq, strengthening this media function can help reduce systemic human rights abuses.

Distributive Justice Theory: John Rawls, in his theory of justice, highlights the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and freedoms across society. From this viewpoint, media should provide equitable access and representation to all social groups, including minorities, to ensure communicative and informational justice (Rawls, 1971). If the media reproduce inequality, they effectively become instruments of human rights violations.

Media Norm-Setting Theory: This theory suggests that through repeated narratives, images, and symbolic frames, the media shape social norms. If media reproduce norms such as discrimination, silence in the face of violence, or indifference toward human rights, violations will become institutionalized. Conversely, deliberate use of this mechanism to promote human

rights can be an effective media strategy (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

3. Research Background

Table 1

Research Background

Row	Title	Source	Key Finding
1	"Due Diligence: A Criterion at the Heart of the International Human Rights System"	(Hosseini & Rahayi, 2024)	Due diligence as a key principle in the human rights system is the only way to enhance state accountability and guarantee human rights globally.
2	"Artificial Intelligence and Its Impacts on Human Rights and Political Freedoms"	(Azadi, 2024)	Artificial intelligence requires legal regulation to benefit from its advantages while preventing violations of fundamental freedoms.
3	"Phenomenology of Fundamental Human Rights Violations by Authoritarian States in Cyberspace"	(Shoja et al., 2023)	Cyber authoritarianism systematically violates human rights through tools like "keyboard armies."
4	"Violation of the Right to Health Caused by International Sanctions and States' International Responsibility"	(Shayanfar, 2023)	Unilateral sanctions are inhumane, and states bear international responsibility for health rights violations caused by sanctions.
5	"Functions of Social Networks in Preserving and Upholding Human Rights"	(Haj Mohammadi, 2022)	Social networks are double-edged: they empower human rights defenders but also become targets of state restrictions.
6	"The Role of Mass Media in the Development of Human Rights"	(Kalkali & Raeisi Sha'ar, 2019)	Media play a central role in institutionalizing human rights norms, and unreasonable restrictions on them amount to human rights violations.
7	"The Role of Media in Developing Human Rights Norms in the Age of Globalization"	(Abbasi Ashlaghi & Norouzi Firouz, 2018)	Globalization, through media, elevates human rights from a national to a transnational concept.
8	"The Violation of Human Rights through Terrorist Actions and the Mechanism to Combat It"	(Bozorgmeheri & Kia Rostami, 2017)	Counterterrorism efforts must not justify human rights violations; international oversight mechanisms are essential.
9	"International Disputes, Media Coverage, and Backlash Against International Law"	(Brutger & Strezhnev, 2017)	Independent media are essential for guaranteeing human rights and must be protected against state restrictions.
10	"Designing Mechanisms: Behavioral Sciences and AI in International Relations"	(David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2022)	Integrating AI and behavioral sciences into human rights requires robust ethical and legal frameworks to prevent misuse.
11	"Back to Basics: Human Rights Violations and Dehumanization"	(Amani et al., 2023)	Dehumanization is both a cause and consequence of human rights violations; breaking this cycle requires discourse and policy change.
12	"Report on Human Rights in Iraq"	(United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2021)	Weak judiciary, widespread corruption, and failure to prosecute crimes undermine human rights in Iraq.
13	"Freedom of the Media in Iraq"	(Rostami Khorasgani, 2021)	Independent media face censorship and threats.
14	"Human Rights Challenges in Iraq's Post-2003 Governance"	(Al-Dulaimi, 2020)	Administrative corruption and institutional failure drive human rights violations in post-Saddam Iraq.
15	"Iraq: Deadly Response to Protests"	(Human Rights, 2020)	Deadly crackdowns, live ammunition, and arbitrary arrests characterize the response to Iraqi protests.
16	"Promoting Human Rights Under Fire: The Mitigating Effect of NGOs in Armed Conflicts"	(Abbasi Ashlaghi & Norouzi Firouz, 2018)	NGOs are crucial in reducing human rights violations during armed conflicts and must be strengthened.
17	"Escape from Hell: Torture and Sexual Slavery in Islamic State Captivity in Iraq"	(Amnesty International, 2016)	Systematic atrocities include sexual slavery, massacres of Yazidis, and destruction of cultural heritage.
18	"Democracy in Iraq: History, Politics, Discourse"	(Isakhan, 2015)	After 2003, relative media freedom emerged but was quickly pulled into sectarian rivalries.
19	"McQuail's Mass Communication Theory"	(McQuail, 2010)	Media can mobilize public opinion against human rights violations.

Historical studies and human rights reports show that Iraq has experienced widespread and systematic human rights violations across different historical periods. These violations can be analyzed in three time phases:

A) Pre-Saddam Iraq (1932–1968)

- Structural discrimination against religious minorities (Shi'a and Yazidis) and ethnic minorities (Kurds) (Batatu, 1978).
- Suppression of popular protests and absence of freedom of expression (Tripp, 2007).

- Arbitrary detentions and torture in state prisons (Al-Khafaji, 2004; Dawisha, 2009).

B) Iraq under Saddam Hussein (1979–2003)
- The Anfal campaign and chemical bombardment of Halabja (Human Rights, 1993).
- Mass executions and enforced disappearances of dissidents (Amnesty International, 2002).
- Severe persecution of religious minorities (Shi'a, Yazidis, Christians) (Baram, 1991).
- Restrictions on press freedom and widespread censorship (Human Rights, 1993; Makiya, 1998).

C) Post-Saddam Iraq (2003–Present)
- Sectarian violence and mass killings of civilians (Isakhan, 2015).
- Crimes of ISIS against Yazidis and women (Amnesty International, 2016).
- Suppression of popular protests (2019–2021) with live ammunition and arbitrary arrests (Human Rights, 2020).
- Pressure on journalists and closure of independent media (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2021).
- Infiltration of militias into security and judicial institutions (International Crisis Group, 2020).
- Weak judicial structures and inefficiency of oversight bodies in protecting human rights (Amnesty International, 2015; Isakhan, 2020; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq & Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019).

Iraq, across all three eras, has faced distinct patterns of human rights violations; however, a common theme is the persistent absence of independent oversight and judicial mechanisms.

A review of theoretical literature and case studies shows that existing research on human rights and media mainly focuses on four key areas:

First, the dual role of media and new technologies in strengthening or undermining human rights.

Studies emphasize that media and social networks are powerful tools for raising awareness and defending fundamental freedoms while simultaneously being vulnerable to authoritarian pressure and governmental restrictions (Abbasi Ashlaghi & Norouzi Firouz, 2018; Haj Mohammadi, 2022; McQuail, 2010; Rostami Khorasgani, 2021). Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence require new legal and ethical frameworks to prevent misuse and violations of individual freedoms (Azadi, 2024; David & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2022).

Second, structural human rights violations within authoritarianism and sanctions.

Research has shown that cyber authoritarianism and digital suppression tools such as "keyboard armies" systematically undermine civil liberties (Shoja et al., 2023). Likewise, unilateral sanctions can jeopardize fundamental rights such as the right to health and generate international responsibility for states (Shayanfar, 2023).

Third, specific manifestations of human rights violations in Iraq across three historical stages:
- In the pre-Saddam era: ethnic discrimination, suppression of protests, and arbitrary detentions (Batatu, 1978; Dawisha, 2009; Tripp, 2007).
- Under Saddam Hussein: the Anfal campaign, chemical attacks in Halabja, mass executions, and severe media censorship (Amnesty International, 2002; Baram, 1991; Human Rights, 1993).
- Post-Saddam: despite relative media expansion, sectarian violence, ISIS atrocities, suppression of the 2019–2021 protests, weak judiciary, pressure on journalists, and militia influence persist (Amnesty International, 2016; Human Rights, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020; Isakhan, 2015; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2021).

Fourth, the gap between theory and practice.

While the theoretical discourse underscores the importance of state accountability, strengthening independent media, and institutionalizing human rights norms, Iraq still suffers from structural deficiencies such as systemic corruption, weak institutions, and the influence of armed non-state actors (Al-Dulaimi, 2020; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2021).

The research background reveals that human rights violations in Iraq are shaped not only by internal conditions but also by regional and international variables. In this context, media and civil society organizations can act as mediators between society and the state, exerting social and political pressure to

facilitate improvements in Iraq's human rights landscape.

4. Methodology

Given that the purpose of the present study was to propose a media model for mitigating the consequences of human rights violations in post-Saddam Iraq (2003 to the present), the research approach was qualitative. Accordingly, and based on the dimensions under investigation, the grounded theory method was employed. In this study, the systematic design and approach of Strauss and Corbin were applied.

The statistical population included all faculty members of universities in Iraq specializing in media, communication, human rights, international relations, and political science in 2024–2025. A sample of 13 participants was selected purposively and theoretically, based on the principle of theoretical saturation. The primary data collection tool was semi-structured interviews. All interviews and data collection were conducted inside Iraq within the real media and political context of the country. The data gathered through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the three-stage coding process (open, axial, and selective coding).

The coding process was carried out using MAXQDA 2020, a specialized digital tool for qualitative data analysis, which facilitated the organization, categorization, and mapping of meaning patterns. It is important to note that artificial intelligence, in the sense of machine learning algorithms or predictive models, was not used in this process; all coding and analysis were performed based on the researcher's human interpretation, supported only by the analytical features of the software.

5. Findings and Results

Open coding, as the first stage of information extraction, involves assigning meaningful labels to meaningful units (text, images, videos, audio) and acts like assembling valuable puzzle pieces to construct a theoretical framework. It should be noted that in this study,

MAXQDA 2020—one of the specialized versions of this qualitative data analysis tool—was used. In fact, preliminary coding refers to the initial evaluation of documents and observations to prepare data for the process of open coding.

In this section, all interviews, which included 13 semi-structured interviews, were first examined. Subsequently, documents were analyzed, and initial concepts and codes were extracted based on the meaningful units identified during preliminary coding. The total number of initial, non-repetitive codes was 695. After removing duplicates and consulting with the academic supervisors and advisors, the number of unique initial codes was refined to 83.

In practice, the researcher reached theoretical saturation after 12 interviews and the categorization of the initial codes. The researcher's interpretation was based on the outputs of the conducted analyses, namely the latent content analysis of the interviews. The frequency of codes did not determine the interpretation; rather, the focus was on the qualitative richness of each document and the insights it contributed. For each of the 13 documents that contributed to theoretical saturation, the researcher evaluated the quality and the type of information provided.

In this section, to inform the audience and provide them with additional insight, a word cloud chart of the extracted codes from the software is presented, based on the frequency of these codes. Accordingly, the researcher states, according to the study's output, that these 142 unique codes have a total frequency of 1,880 occurrences.

In this part, the categorization of the initial codes that had meaningful interconnections was carried out using abstract focused coding. However, as previously explained, the procedure in this section involved grouping the more operational codes as subcategories under initial codes with a higher conceptual and abstract level. The researcher, in consultation with the academic supervisors and advisors, constructed the probable main and subcategories in the form of Table 2.

Table 2

Initial Codes and Main Categories

Initial Codes	Main Categories
Lack of the right to social welfare – Lack of the right to life – Lack of the right to freedom of religion – Lack of the right to human dignity – Lack of the right to freedom of expression – Lack of citizenship rights – Lack of the right to education	Disrespect for individual rights
Treatment of religious minorities – Treatment of racial minorities – Treatment of gender minorities – Treatment of political minorities – Treatment of ethnic minorities	Intolerance toward minorities
Lack of promotion of democracy – Lack of promotion of peace – Lack of promotion of individual property rights – Lack of promotion of transparency – Lack of promotion of justice	Absence of central mechanisms
Violation of women's and children's rights – Violation of social rights – Violation of civil rights – Violation of political rights	Absence of oversight mechanisms
Use of Twitter – Use of Instagram – Use of WhatsApp – Use of Telegram – Use of Facebook	Online platforms
Providing credible information – Providing exposé reports – Providing exhibition reports	Online reporting
Creating expert debates – Creating related hashtags – Creating specialized meetings – Creating interactive programs	Online campaigns
Producing specialized podcasts – Producing short videos – Producing real documentaries – Producing related images	Digital content production
Cooperation with NGOs – Cooperation with national media – Cooperation with international media – Integrating media	Media networking
Publishing personal stories – Publishing empathy stories – Publishing solidarity stories	Media storytelling
Legal inconsistencies – Lack of legal protections – Lack of anticipation of international regulations – Lack of anticipation of domestic regulations	Legal drivers
Repressive laws – Lack of independence and national sovereignty – Political interference – Propagandistic use of human rights	Political drivers
War – Colonialism – Occupation	Military drivers
Administrative corruption – Lack of social reconciliation – Racial and ethnic discrimination – Lack of social demands	Social drivers
Lack of media support – Lack of sustainable development – Lack of social education – Failure to confront oppression – Lack of security – Poor resource management	Systemic inefficiency
Pressure on the press – Pressure on journalists – Pressure on political analysts – Pressure on grassroots media – Arbitrary detentions – Existence of information gaps	Political suffocation
Information censorship – Media censorship – Political censorship – Cultural censorship	Soft repression
Lack of economic reform – Lack of political reform – Lack of legal reform – Lack of social reform – Lack of cultural reform	Lack of restructuring
Poverty – Income discrimination – Unequal distribution of wealth – Employment discrimination – Economic sanctions – Lack of fairness – Economic crisis	Absence of promotional justice
Lack of cultural discourse consensus – Lack of political discourse consensus – Lack of civil discourse consensus – Lack of economic discourse consensus	Lack of discursive consensus
Advancement of political freedom – Advancement of social freedom – Advancement of ethnic freedom – Advancement of cultural freedom – Advancement of the rule of law	Expansion of freedom
Strengthening social cohesion – Strengthening social homogeneity – Raising social awareness – Promoting a culture of accountability – Promoting critical thinking	Civil society participation
Improving oversight mechanisms – Improving civil institutions – Enhancing political transparency – Gaining international support – Improving media literacy	Fundamental reforms
Facilitating political communication – Facilitating social communication – Facilitating economic communication – Facilitating cultural communication – Facilitating ethnic communication	Comprehensive facilitation

In the above tables, the initial codes and main categories were generated through the researcher's engagement with the literature and analysis of participants' interviews. Ultimately, 24 main categories were identified: (Disrespect for individual rights, Intolerance toward minorities, Absence of central mechanisms, Absence of oversight mechanisms, Legal drivers, Political drivers, Military drivers, Social drivers, Lack of restructuring, Lack of discursive consensus, Absence of promotional justice, Systemic inefficiency, Political suffocation, Soft repression, Online platforms, Online reporting, Online campaigns, Digital content production, Media networking, Media storytelling, Expansion of freedom, Civil society participation, Fundamental reforms, Comprehensive facilitation).

Following this stage, the research process moved toward developing axial codes, which are recognized as constructs within academic frameworks.

Axial coding is essentially the process of linking categories with their subcategories so that the researcher can arrive at a conceptual framework with the highest possible level of abstraction. This process is referred to as "axial" because the coding revolves around a central category, and the categories connect to each other across dimensions and properties. The aim of axial coding is to reintegrate the data that were fractured during open coding.

In this phase, the Strauss and Corbin paradigm model, which is suitable for grounded theory strategies, can be applied; that is, the categories are grouped into clusters such as influencing factors, consequences, strategies, context, and setting. The axial codes emerging from conceptually related categories are then classified so that, in the next step, the process of selective coding can integrate these axial codes. An example is provided in the following table.

Table 3

Conceptualization of the "Human Rights Violations" Code

Initial Codes	Main Categories
Lack of the right to social welfare – Lack of the right to life – Lack of the right to freedom of religion – Lack of the right to human dignity – Lack of the right to freedom of expression – Lack of citizenship rights – Lack of the right to education	Disrespect for individual rights
Treatment of religious minorities – Treatment of racial minorities – Treatment of gender minorities – Treatment of political minorities – Treatment of ethnic minorities	Intolerance toward minorities
Lack of promotion of democracy – Lack of promotion of peace – Lack of promotion of individual property rights – Lack of promotion of transparency – Lack of promotion of justice	Absence of central mechanisms
Violation of women's and children's rights – Violation of social rights – Violation of civil rights – Violation of political rights	Absence of oversight mechanisms

Figure 1

Tree Conceptualization for the Axial Code "Human Rights Violations"
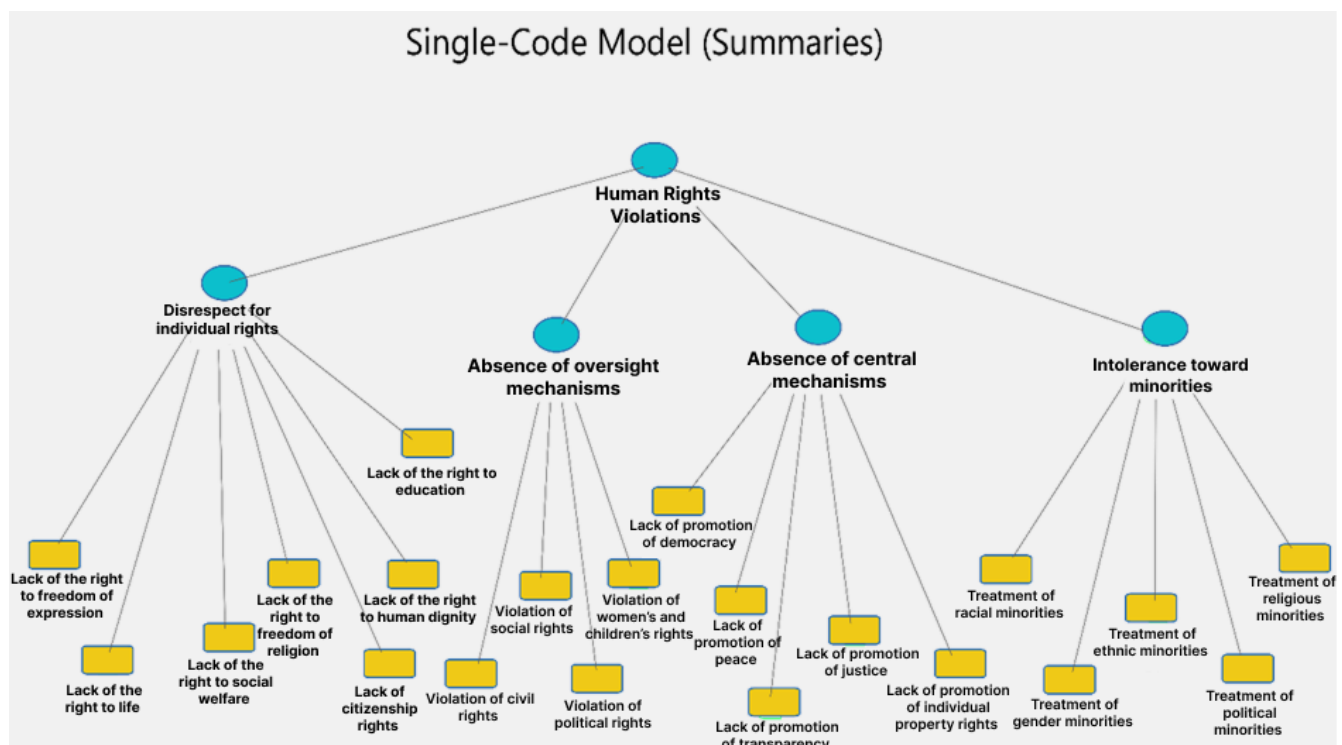
In axial coding, the categories are systematically developed and connected to their subcategories; however, research findings only take the shape of a theory when the main categories are integrated to form a broader theoretical framework. Thus, selective coding is defined as the process of integrating and refining the categories and axial codes and establishing their interconnections.

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This is, in fact, a relatively new coding method in which hypotheses are generated by the software and offered to the researcher. The researcher can select the hypotheses relevant to the study and their own expertise to create a new model. The MAXQDA software analyzes the simultaneity or overlap of codes and categories through a matrix called the Code Relation Browser and visually presents it to the researcher. At this stage, the researcher can use strong or even moderate overlaps as a highly reliable tool for generating hypotheses and building the model.

Ultimately, after reviewing the software outputs and exploring the existing literature, the overall model of this study was extracted. This model was developed through the Strauss and Corbin grounded theory strategy and the three-stage coding process, and it is presented in the form of a paradigm model. The model includes seven axial codes or constructs, which were interconnected using the software through five scientific hypotheses.

Figure 2

Paradigm (Pattern) Model of Human Rights Violations and Media
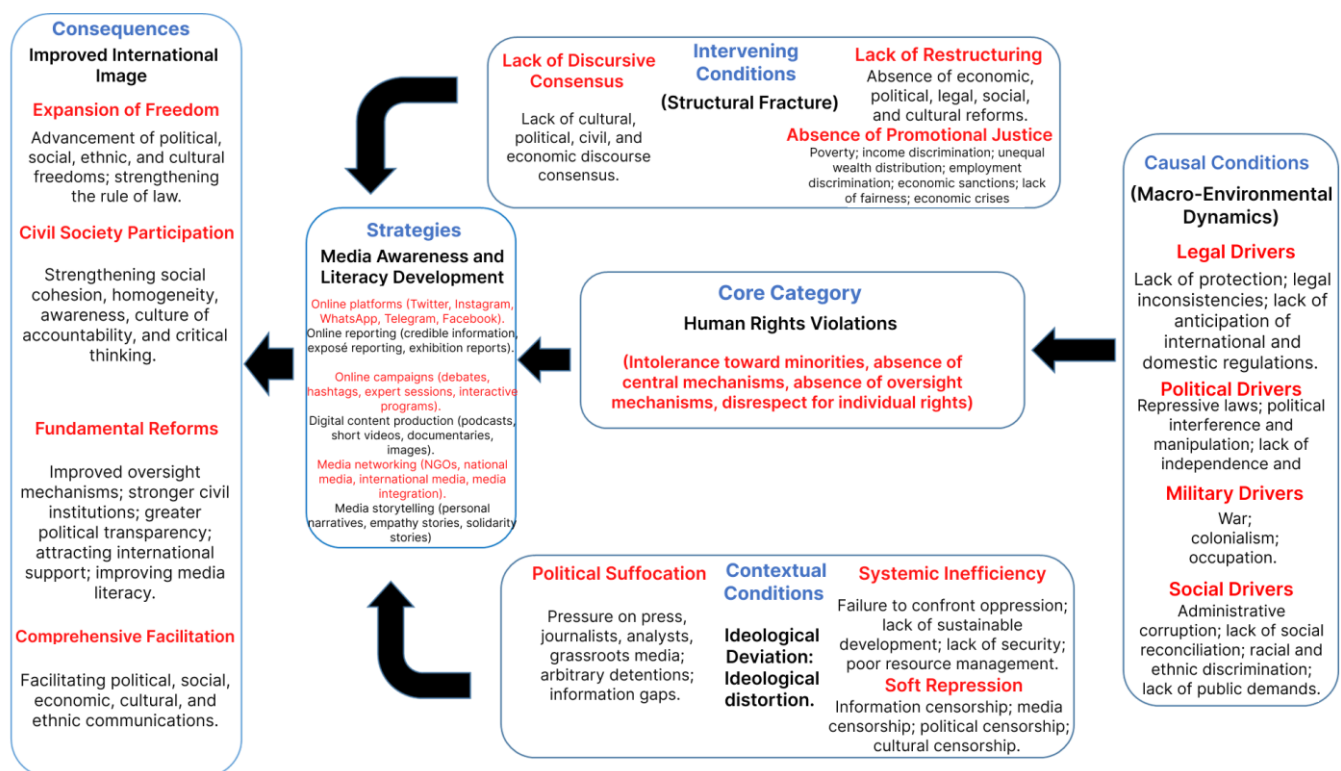
6.   Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to design a media-based model for mitigating the consequences of human rights violations in Iraq after 2003. Through a grounded theory approach, the findings identified seven central constructs and a network of causal, contextual, and intervening conditions that shape the country's human rights environment. The results show that human rights violations in Iraq emerge from complex macro-structural forces—including political repression, legal fragility, military instability, and social corruption—and that a purposeful media strategy can counteract their destructive consequences. The model highlights that media awareness, digital campaigns, content production, and media networking create pathways for civil society participation, international support, and structural reform.

A core finding is that causal conditions such as legal and political fragility continue to generate systemic vulnerability. The analysis demonstrated that Iraq's weak normative infrastructure—including legal inconsistencies, lack of effective oversight mechanisms, and gaps in the promotion of democratic values—feeds into persistent violations (Alizadeh et al., 2024; Hosseini

& Rahayi, 2024). These results align with previous research showing that post-Saddam governance struggles with entrenched corruption and the failure to enforce human rights guarantees (Al-Dulaimi, 2020). The continued penetration of militias and factional groups into state institutions further undermines the judicial system and deters accountability (International Crisis Group, 2020). By empirically confirming these drivers through the voices of Iraqi experts, this study strengthens earlier theoretical work on state weakness and human rights vulnerability (Baram, 1991; Dawisha, 2009).

The contextual conditions uncovered—such as ideological deviation, systemic inefficiency, and political suffocation—demonstrate how the everyday environment of media and civil society is constrained. These factors explain why even when formal human rights instruments exist, they fail to translate into protective mechanisms on the ground (Isakhan, 2020; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2021). Prior reports have similarly pointed to arbitrary detentions, surveillance, and intimidation of journalists (Human Rights, 2020; Rostami Khorasgani, 2021), showing how soft repression and fear suppress watchdog functions. The present findings reinforce the idea that legal frameworks alone are insufficient if political and ideological climates remain hostile.

Against this backdrop, the strategies identified in the model—media awareness, online reporting, digital content production, and media storytelling—emerge as actionable mechanisms. Interviewees emphasized that digital platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and others) provide alternative spaces where state-controlled narratives can be challenged and where minority voices may be amplified (Abbasi Ashlaghi & Norouzi Firouz, 2018; Haj Mohammadi, 2022). This resonates with developmental media theory, which advocates for media's proactive role in fostering democratic discourse and civic literacy (McQuail, 2010). Similarly, Foucault's discourse theory suggests that shifting the narrative space is essential to break cycles of normalized discrimination and structural violence (Foucault, 1980). The study extends these theoretical arguments by mapping specific Iraqi practices—such as grassroots online campaigns, storytelling of lived experiences, and networking with NGOs—that have already shown potential to disrupt repressive narratives.

Importantly, the model's consequences—expanding freedom, strengthening civil society, and improving international image—are consistent with prior literature on media's transformative capacity. Previous studies have documented how exposing abuses and mobilizing public sentiment can pressure governments and catalyze reform (Alquraan & Aduse, 2022; Norris, 2010). In Iraq, as our participants confirmed, international visibility achieved through digital campaigns can attract external support and bolster local human rights defenders, echoing reports on how NGOs and transnational advocacy have mitigated violence in conflict settings (Abbasi Ashlaghi & Norouzi Firouz, 2018; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq & Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). At the same time, the model warns that political manipulation of media and sectarian polarization can hijack these same tools to escalate tensions (Shoja et al., 2023). This dual potential requires careful capacity building and ethical guidelines for responsible media use.

Another significant contribution is the integration of distributive justice and media watchdog perspectives into a localized Iraqi framework. While Rawlsian justice has typically been discussed in abstract legal terms (Rawls, 1971), this study operationalizes it by showing that equitable access to media for minorities—Kurds, Yazidis, and others—is essential for fair narrative power. Likewise, the watchdog model is not merely normative; our findings detail how transparency-driven reporting and exposé campaigns can counteract impunity and push for policy shifts (Brutger & Strezhnev, 2017; Gholizadeh, 2023). This localized articulation adds practical depth to global theory.

The model also contributes to understanding human rights in hybrid post-conflict systems. Iraq's trajectory—from Ba'athist repression (Batatu, 1978; Human Rights, 1993) to post-2003 fragility (Isakhan, 2015)—creates a distinct environment where both authoritarian remnants and democratic aspirations coexist. The study shows that media can be simultaneously vulnerable to co-optation and powerful for reform. It adds to comparative work on states transitioning from dictatorship to fragile democracy and suggests that sustainable human rights improvements depend on both digital empowerment and institutional rebuilding (Al-Dulaimi, 2020; Amnesty International, 2015).

Finally, the research bridges the gap between normative frameworks and practical application. Many global human rights discourses emphasize accountability and freedom of expression, yet in Iraq these ideals have been hindered by weak structures and high-risk activism. By co-developing a bottom-up media model with local experts, this study offers a context-sensitive roadmap. Its participatory design aligns with calls for localized human rights solutions rather than imported blueprints (Amani et al., 2023; Hosseini & Rahayi, 2024).

Although the study provides a robust conceptual framework, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is qualitative and based on the perspectives of a relatively small group of Iraqi academic experts. While theoretical saturation was reached, the sample size and the academic orientation of participants may have excluded grassroots activists or journalists with direct field experience. Second, the volatile security and political context of Iraq constrained data collection, limiting access to some actors and leading to caution in responses. Third, as a grounded theory study, the model is interpretive; its categories reflect researcher coding and conceptualization, which—despite validation by experts—remain contextually bound. Lastly, the rapidly evolving digital landscape means that some identified media tools or platforms may change quickly, challenging the long-term stability of certain strategic recommendations.

Future studies should expand the participant base to include journalists, human rights defenders, NGO leaders, and community activists to capture a broader and more practical perspective on media strategies. Mixed-method approaches, combining large-scale surveys with qualitative interviews, could test and refine the proposed model. Longitudinal research could explore how media interventions influence human rights outcomes over time in Iraq and comparable post-conflict societies. Comparative cross-country analyses—especially among states experiencing hybrid governance and sectarian divisions—could strengthen the generalizability of the model. Additionally, future work might integrate digital analytics to assess the real impact of online campaigns, storytelling, and media networking on public opinion and policy change.

For practitioners, the study's model suggests several actionable steps. Media organizations in Iraq should invest in capacity building to produce fact-based, rights-oriented content and resist political manipulation. NGOs and civil society can use digital campaigns and storytelling to raise awareness and foster solidarity among diverse communities. Policymakers and regulators should protect media independence, ensure legal safeguards for journalists, and facilitate access to information. International organizations could support training and safety protocols for human rights media activism while helping to amplify local narratives abroad. By adopting these practices, Iraq's media landscape can gradually shift from a vulnerability point to a protective shield against human rights violations.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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