ASSESSING THE IMAGE OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ IN KAZAKH MEDIA: RESULTS FROM THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT. *Media has the power to shape a country's image and influence public perceptions. The Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Iraq established diplomatic relations in 1995, and since then, both countries have been working to improve their ties. This article examines the recent media representation of the Republic of Iraq in Kazakhstani media from 2017 to 2025.*

The purpose of this article is to analyze how the Republic of Iraq is perceived in Kazakh media and what kind of image is being created, using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis conducted manually.

The theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of image theory, providing a literature review on the perception of the Republic of Iraq abroad, and highlighting the background of bilateral relations. The findings, derived from an empirical content analysis of Kazakh news outlets, indicate that Kazakh media predominantly presents a negative image of Iraq.

KEYWORDS: *media image of Iraq, Kazakh media, Kazakh-Iraqi relations, content analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan and Iraq established diplomatic relations at the level of non-resident embassies in 1995. Iraq opened a resident embassy in Kazakhstan in 2008, which marked a significant step in strengthening their relationship. The Middle East and Gulf countries are key partners for Kazakhstan (Ayupova et al., 2019). Both nations share a mutual interest in combating terrorism and enhancing regional stability. There is potential for economic cooperation despite logistical challenges, and collaboration also extends to scientific fields.

Moreover, Kazakhstan and Iraq work together in organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), as well as through bilateral engagements within the United Nations and its specialized agencies.

Theoretical and practical understanding of the media image of the country plays a crucial role in public perceptions. Situated between political elites and society, it serves as a key

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force in influencing how international actors are portrayed (Elgström and Chaban, 2012), and as a consequence affects foreign policy (Soroka and Wlezien 2008). The portrayal of Iraq in media varies significantly between Western and non-Western outlets. Western media often depict Iraq as unstable and a security threat, especially post-2003 invasion, while non-Western media highlight Iraq's cultural heritage and resilience amidst foreign intervention (Dawson, 2007; Hirsh, 2013). Western narratives focus on Iraq's role in global conflicts, while non-Western outlets stress the humanitarian costs and Iraq's identity beyond the conflict (Chomsky 2003). These differing portrayals impact public perception, policy, and the global understanding of Iraq's situation, with the Western view dominating mainstream media (Dawson, 2007).

This article fills a research gap by relying on an empirical study that applies both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, focusing on the tone of news articles from Kazinform.kz, a state-run media outlet in Kazakhstan, for the period from 2017 to 2025. We apply the research method of visibility and valence (Manheim and Albritton, 1983) which reflects the number of articles published on the topic per each year and their tone. We aim to answer the following research question: *How does Kazinform.kz, a Kazakh state-run media outlet, shape the image of the Republic of Iraq from 2017 to 2025, and to what extent does it align with Western stereotypes, potentially influencing mutual relations?* This question captures the central theme of the research by linking media content analysis with broader implications for diplomatic and economic ties. We also investigate the hypothesis that Kazakh media contributes to a negative image of the Republic of Iraq by following prevalent Western stereotypes. Furthermore, the article argues that negative media coverage acts as an obstacle to greater bilateral cooperation. Despite many years of diplomatic ties between Kazakhstan and Iraq, negative media portrayals may hinder deeper cooperation, especially in areas like trade, investment, and cultural exchange. If Iraq is persistently framed in a negative light, it may contribute to public skepticism or hesitation in strengthening bilateral ties. The main objective of this article is to analyze the results of content analysis of the collected data, uncover the perspective and orientation of news about the Republic of Iraq in the Kazakhstani media, and explore the image that the media creates of Iraq in Kazakhstan.

We found that articles covering Iraq in Kazakhstani media were predominantly negative. Most of these news pieces focused on negative events, particularly the country's challenges with terrorism at the time, while many significant positive events were overlooked by the media.

The structure of the article is as follows: it begins with a theoretical foundation that explains the concepts of country image and media image, followed by a literature review of Iraq's image abroad, and a brief background on Iraq-Kazakhstan ties. The next section details the methodological approach of the study, while the final sections discuss the findings from a content analysis conducted on various media outlets in Kazakhstan.

Theoretical explanation of the terms "country image" and "mass media image" and its influence on the foreign policy

Research in the field of country imageology is primarily interdisciplinary. Although various approaches can be categorized based on their objectives and methodologies,

these distinctions tend to be broad. Some studies concentrate on theoretical aspects of image formation (Perelygina, 2002; Kubryakova, 2008; Popova and Zaripov, 2017, etc.), while others explore the topic from historical and cultural perspectives (Kalyuzhnaya, 2006; Rozhkov & Kismereshkin, 2008, etc.). Research on country image is also conducted within political psychology (Shestopal, 2002; Zaburdaeva, 2012; Derkach and Perelygina, 2006, etc.), as well as from the viewpoints of economics, management, and marketing (Pochepcov, 2006; Strel'cov & Sil'nickij, 2008, etc.). Sociological studies on country image are of practical relevance, especially in examining the social factors that influence its formation.

Image theory, initially developed within American academia to analyze perceptions during the Cold War, focused mainly on the U.S. view of the Soviet Union as an adversary (Silverstein, 1989). This "enemy image" was shaped by deep suspicion and served as a cognitive shortcut for decision-makers in international relations. Such biased perceptions often influenced state actions more than objective facts. Beyond the Cold War, image theory remains relevant in understanding how states perceive each other and the role of these perceptions in shaping foreign policy. The theory emphasizes that subjective interpretations, rather than objective realities, often drive state behavior (Herrmann, 1995).

In historical contexts like the Cold War, image theory explained how adversarial narratives were formed and maintained. Today, it remains a useful tool for analyzing both longstanding rivalries and emerging global issues, providing insight into the role of perception in international relations.

Following the Cold War, the "enemy image" became less central, and new frameworks emerged to address changing global dynamics. Image theory adapted to analyze post-Cold War challenges, such as counterterrorism and national security policies, demonstrating its ongoing relevance in a complex geopolitical landscape. By evolving with contemporary issues, image theory continues to offer valuable insights into the relationship between perception and action in modern international relations (Herrmann, 1995).

According to some scholars, a country's image can be defined as "a collection of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs about a specific country" (Martin & Eroglu, 1993: 193) or as "the sum of people's beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a given country" (Haider & Rein, 1993: 141).

In recent years, there has been growing attention to the role of mass media in shaping a country's image. Contemporary research often defines media image as "the set of emotional and rational views based on information received from the media" or as "a particular portrayal of reality presented to the mass audience by the media industry" (Galinskaya, 2013: 91-94). We adopt a more specific interpretation of this concept, considering media images as "fragments of reality described in professional journalists' texts, reflecting their worldview, values, political preferences, and psychological characteristics" (Galinskaya, 2013: 91).

In today's society, mass media texts, when presented in a specific manner, have become one of the primary sources of stereotypes. As Olshanskij (2001) notes, certain patterns

hold significant weight in how audiences assess social and political processes, playing both positive and negative roles. Lippman (2004) argues that images in the media influence how people perceive reality, contributing to the development of stereotypes that are difficult to dispel. He asserts that, whether accurate or not, these images shape our imagination and lead to persistent stereotypes, particularly political patterns, which are often beyond the empirical experience of the audience and therefore tend to be more enduring.

Furthermore, media plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes and, in turn, influencing foreign policy outcomes (Baum & Potter 2008). Media serves as a crucial intermediary between political elites and the public, shaping perceptions through framing, agenda-setting, and priming. By emphasizing certain narratives and omitting others, the media can construct a country's image in ways that influence public opinion. This, in turn, affects foreign policy decisions, as democratic leaders are often responsive to public sentiment. In non-democratic or hybrid regimes, media still plays a role in legitimizing or contesting state-driven foreign policy narratives, reinforcing strategic interests through selective coverage (Baum & Potter 2008). As a consequence, negative sentiments in media coverage may hinder opportunities for deeper cooperation and create obstacles to fostering relations based on mutual trust among political elites and business circles (Lippmann 2017; Sorokka & Wlezien 2008; Baum & Potter 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMAGE OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ ABROAD

The media portrayal of Iraq has been shaped by geopolitical, cultural, and ideological factors, resulting in starkly different representations between Western and non-Western media outlets. These portrayals not only influence public opinion but also shape foreign policy decisions. However, while numerous studies have examined media narratives about Iraq, there remains a gap in critically assessing how these narratives contribute to broader discourses on international relations, media framing, and political communication. This study seeks to address these gaps by engaging with theories of media representation, agenda-setting, and discourse analysis.

The portrayal of Iraq in Western media has largely centered on themes of conflict, threat, and instability, particularly following the Gulf War (1991), the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, and the rise of ISIS in 2014. Scholars such as Chomsky (2003) argue that Iraq was framed as a security threat, particularly through narratives surrounding weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, which played a critical role in justifying military intervention. Dawson (2007) and Lynch (2007) further highlight how the media contributed to a climate of fear by consistently emphasizing instability and violence, reinforcing public support for interventionist policies.

However, this security-focused framing has been criticized for its reductionist approach, as it often overlooks Iraq's economic potential, cultural heritage, and the lived experiences of its citizens (Zinczenko, 2014; Kaldor, 2007). Said (1978) argues that Western media representations of the Middle East—including Iraq—have been shaped by Orientalist perspectives, which depict the region as backward, chaotic, and in need of Western intervention. This aligns with agenda-setting theory, which suggests that media coverage not only reflects but actively shapes public perceptions and policy priorities (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

In contrast, non-Western media outlets, particularly those in the Arab world, have framed Iraq's struggles within a broader geopolitical context. Rather than portraying Iraq as a failed state, these outlets emphasize the socio-political consequences of foreign intervention, the resilience of the Iraqi people, and the historical and cultural significance of the nation (Hirsh, 2013; Fawaz, 2003). Gerges (2016) notes that Arab media coverage often highlights Iraq's role in regional power struggles, presenting alternative narratives that challenge the dominant Western discourse. This aligns with research on counter-framing, which suggests that non-Western narratives actively resist and reframe dominant Western perspectives (Entman, 2007).

To fully understand the contrasting portrayals of Iraq, it is essential to situate the discussion within key theoretical frameworks. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) helps explain how media coverage prioritizes certain narratives over others, shaping public perception and policy debates. Similarly, framing theory (Entman, 1993) illustrates how media outlets construct meaning through a selective emphasis on particular themes and perspectives. Western media, for instance, have framed Iraq predominantly through a lens of security and crisis, while non-Western media have framed it in terms of resistance, resilience, and foreign intervention.

Additionally, discourse analysis provides insights into how language, imagery, and rhetoric influence perceptions of Iraq. Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse highlights how power relations are embedded in media narratives, shaping the way audiences interpret global events. The securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998) further supports this by demonstrating how media discourses transform political issues into existential threats, justifying extraordinary measures such as military intervention. These frameworks provide a critical lens through which to evaluate existing media portrayals and highlight the implications of such representations for international relations.

While previous studies have extensively analyzed Western media's depiction of Iraq, there is a lack of research that systematically compares these representations with those in non-Western media. This study fills the gap by critically engaging with both Western and non-Western media narratives, applying a structured theoretical framework to assess their broader implications.

Moreover, while research has explored the political consequences of media portrayals (e.g., support for military intervention), less attention has been given to how these portrayals shape cultural perceptions and Kazakh or Central Asian discourses on Iraq. By incorporating perspectives from political communication and international relations, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Iraq is framed in Kazakh media and the implications of these narratives for local policymaking and public opinion.

Media representations of Iraq in both Western and non-Western outlets are deeply influenced by ideological, political, and cultural factors. While Western media have predominantly focused on conflict and security threats, non-Western media have presented alternative narratives that emphasize Iraq's cultural heritage, resilience, and the impact of foreign intervention. By engaging critically with theories of media framing, discourse analysis, and agenda-setting, this study enhances our understanding

of how Kazakh media portrayals shape local perceptions, which in turn influence policy decisions. This research bridges existing gaps and contributes to ongoing debates in media studies, political communication, and international relations.

BILATERAL RELATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ AND THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

Since the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1995, Kazakhstan and Iraq have worked to strengthen their cooperation. The two countries have maintained an ongoing diplomatic dialogue, exchanged political views on numerous issues, and sought to deepen their bilateral engagement.

Kazakhstan's involvement with Iraq aligns with its broader policy in the Middle East, which prioritizes stability, economic cooperation, and energy security. Both countries share common interests in combating terrorism and promoting regional stability. Although economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and Iraq remains modest, it shows signs of potential growth, particularly given the mutual willingness to expand ties.

The historical and cultural connections between the peoples of Kazakhstan and Iraq — and more broadly, between the peoples of Central Asia and Iraq —date back centuries. Many individuals from the region studied in Baghdad during the Abbasid era, which lasted from the 8th to the 13th century. During this period, Baghdad served as the capital of a vast empire extending from Europe in the west to the borders of China in the east. Prominent leaders of the Abbasid state, including Qutayba ibn Muslim al-Bahili from Iraq, were instrumental in the Islamic expansion into Central Asia. Furthermore, numerous philosophers, scholars, and students from Central Asia resided and studied in Baghdad, including the renowned philosopher and scientist Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (Anarbayev et al., 2016).

Moreover, Iraq is geographically one of the closest Arab countries to Kazakhstan. These historical and geographic factors have contributed to long-standing ties and cultural affinities between the two nations.

Furthermore, both countries continue cooperation within the framework of the United Nations Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Iraq's cooperative approach toward Central Asia aligns with Kazakhstan's interest in expanding its presence in Middle Eastern markets, particularly through projects that align with its 2050 development strategy, which seeks to diversify Kazakhstan's economic ties (Hirsh, 2013).

The bilateral relationship between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Iraq is characterized by both opportunities and challenges. While political relations are stable and continue to grow, economic cooperation remains constrained by logistical barriers that hinder trade. Although cultural exchanges are limited, they serve as an important channel for strengthening ties between the two nations.

Furthermore, the success of this bilateral relationship depends on the ability of both countries to overcome internal and external challenges and to capitalize on their shared interests in regional stability and development. Despite certain obstacles to expanding bilateral relations—particularly in the economic sphere – several key positive factors

support their development. Chief among these is the mutual desire to strengthen cooperation, along with the presence of numerous opportunities and resources that facilitate closer engagement.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND LIMITATIONS

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine media portrayals of Iraq in news articles from 2017 to 2025. The dataset was collected manually, using the keyword "Iraq" to retrieve relevant articles in Russian, as it is a widely used language in local news consumption (Ibrayeva, 2019). The selection of articles, coding, and tone classification were conducted by a single author without the use of data analysis software. The findings are presented in tables to illustrate the proportion, frequency, and sentiment of the articles analyzed each year.

To assess visibility and valence, the study examines the frequency of articles published annually (visibility) and their sentiment (valence). The sentiment was categorized manually as positive, negative, or neutral based on the tone of the headlines. Since only one researcher conducted the classification, no intercoder reliability test was performed. The subjective nature of tone identification is recognized as a limitation of this study.

While this methodology allows for a systematic examination of media representation, several limitations should be noted:

1. Subjectivity in categorization – the classification of articles based on their tone was conducted manually by a single author, introducing the potential for bias in interpreting sentiments. Different researchers might categorize specific headlines differently.
2. Absence of intercoder reliability testing – as only one researcher performed the sorting and analysis, no reliability test was conducted to evaluate consistency across multiple coders, limiting the study's reproducibility.
3. Selection bias in data collection – the study focuses exclusively on articles published by Kazinform.kz, a state-run media outlet, which may not represent the full spectrum of perspectives within Kazakh media or the broader regional coverage.
4. Lack of automated data processing – since all data collection, sorting, and analysis were done manually without computational tools, the study may have limitations in terms of scalability and objectivity compared to automated sentiment analysis methods.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into media portrayals of Iraq over time. Future research could benefit from expanding the dataset to include multiple media sources and employing automated sentiment analysis for increased reliability.

MAIN FINDINGS

The data presented in the table reveals the portrayal of Iraq in Kazakh media from 2017 to 2025, focusing on the balance between positive and negative tones. Over this period, the total number of positive portrayals amounted to 38, while negative portrayals were significantly higher, totaling 62, which means 100 news pieces were collected during the media content analysis. This disparity indicates a prevailing tendency in Kazakh media toward presenting Iraq in a more critical light, with a clear dominance of negative coverage.

Table 1. Positive and negative valence in Kazakh media coverage. Authors' elaboration

Tone/ Year	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	Total
+	0	9	4	2	4	2	4	4	9	38
-	1	16	6	3	4	3	4	2	23	62
Total	1	25	10	5	8	5	8	6	32	100

Source: compiled by the authors

Graph 1. The portrayal of Iraq in Kazakh media from 2017 to 2025
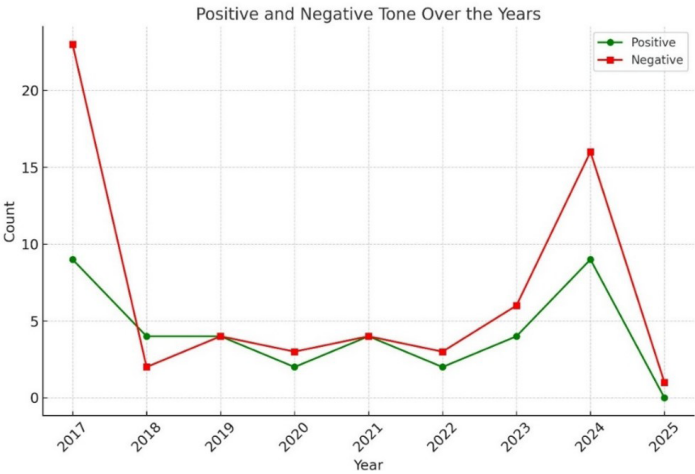
Source: authors' elaboration

In the year-by-year breakdown, the portrayal of Iraq remained largely negative throughout the period, with only a few years showing slight deviations from this trend. In 2024, the number of negative depictions was more than double the number of positive ones, highlighting a strong inclination toward critical reporting. In 2023, the gap between positive and negative tones was somewhat narrower, but negative portrayals still outweighed positive ones. In contrast, 2022 showed a relatively balanced tone, with a marginal difference between positive and negative coverage. However, the year 2021 marked an exception with an equal number of positive and negative portrayals, indicating a shift toward a more neutral approach during that period.

In 2020, negative portrayals of Iraq outnumbered positive ones, continuing a dominant trend. In 2019, the media exhibited a balance between positive and negative portrayals, yet the overall tone remained cautious. The year 2018 showed a slightly more positive perspective, but it still did not outweigh the negative aspects. Lastly, 2017 recorded the highest number of negative portrayals, reflecting a general focus on Iraq's security challenges and political instability.

Although there was some positive coverage related to diplomatic relations, humanitarian efforts, or reconstruction initiatives in Iraq, the overall trend highlights the complex

and often critical portrayal of Iraq in Kazakhstani media. This portrayal is influenced by various factors that shape media focus and narratives.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The tendency to depict Iraq negatively in Kazakhstani media can be linked to ongoing security issues within the country. The period leading up to 2017 was marked by a major war against the terrorist organization ISIS, which carried out deadly attacks until it was defeated and expelled from most Iraqi territories that year.

As discussed in the theoretical section, media framing plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of foreign states, often reinforcing existing stereotypes and geopolitical narratives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). The concept of media-driven agenda-setting suggests that the repeated emphasis on Iraq's security problems and political instability contributes to a perception of Iraq as a fragile or conflict-ridden state, limiting alternative perspectives on the country's development and diplomatic efforts.

This pattern of framing aligns with Western media portrayals of Iraq, which have historically concentrated on themes of war, terrorism, and instability, often neglecting aspects such as Iraq's economic recovery, cultural heritage, or diplomatic engagements (Chomsky, 2003; Lynch, 2007). The presence of similar framing in Kazakhstani media answers the research question about the extent to which international narratives shape local media coverage. Since Iraq has often been a focal point of global media attention, typically in a negative context due to conflict and instability, Kazakhstani media reshape these narratives for their domestic audience.

However, this study also identified occasional instances of positive coverage, particularly in relation to diplomatic relations, humanitarian aid, and economic cooperation. This suggests that while security concerns dominate the portrayal, there is also recognition of Iraq's efforts in reconstruction and its role in international partnerships. This aligns with research highlighting the role of selective framing in shaping public perceptions, where certain aspects of a country's image are emphasized while others remain underrepresented (Gerges, 2016; Entman, 2007).

As media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, the predominantly negative portrayal of Iraq may contribute to a cautious approach toward Kazakhstan's engagement with the country. This negative perception may discourage deeper economic and political ties, as businesses and policymakers could view engagement with Iraq as a high-risk endeavor.

However, the existence of some positive portrayals – especially in the context of diplomatic and humanitarian cooperation—suggests opportunities for fostering stronger bilateral relations. Kazakhstan has previously shown interest in supporting stabilization efforts in Iraq, including through humanitarian aid and diplomatic initiatives. If media narratives begin to incorporate more coverage of Iraq's economic recovery and regional partnerships, this could help cultivate a more nuanced and balanced perception of the country, encouraging greater engagement between Kazakhstan and Iraq.

From a policy perspective, Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy emphasizes regional cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and economic diversification. A more diversified media portrayal of Iraq could facilitate initiatives aimed at expanding trade, investment, and cultural exchanges between the two nations. Additionally, increased government or diplomatic communication efforts that highlight positive aspects of Iraq's development could help counterbalance the prevailing negative framing in media narratives.

A significant challenge is the absence of permanent Kazakhstani media offices or other dedicated sources for gathering information in Iraq. This lack of direct access hinders the accuracy and balance of news coverage. Many media outlets rely on second-hand reports from other sources, often available online, leading to repeated narratives that may lack objectivity. Notably, there was no indication that any Kazakhstani media outlet traveled to Iraq during the study period to independently investigate developments on the ground, particularly the many positive transformations occurring in the country.

In response, the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in Kazakhstan actively works to clarify key facts and highlight Iraq's significant progress. This includes the country's economic potential, strong international relations, and political and economic growth. Additionally, Iraq has made strides in fostering a democratic environment, ensuring freedom of the press and expression, and achieving major advancements in women's rights.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of media in shaping international perceptions and influencing foreign policy decision-making. As Baum and Potter (2008) argue, media coverage acts as a crucial intermediary between political elites and the public, affecting both public sentiment and foreign policy choices.

The research successfully achieved its primary objective of analyzing the portrayal of Iraq in Kazakh state-run media from 2017 to 2025. By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the study identified a consistent trend of predominantly negative coverage, reinforcing the hypothesis that Iraq is depicted more critically than positively. These findings highlight the impact of security considerations on media narratives and the broader role of mass media in shaping public perceptions of foreign nations.

By providing an empirical assessment of how Iraq is represented in Kazakhstan – an area largely unexplored in academic discourse – this study fills a significant research gap. The application of the visibility and valence framework allowed for a systematic evaluation of both the frequency and tone of coverage, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of international media representation.

Moreover, the research confirms its main hypothesis: Kazakh media shapes a negative image of the Republic of Iraq, largely reflecting Western stereotypes. Additionally, the findings suggest that negative media coverage acts as a barrier to deeper cooperation, especially in areas like trade, investment, and cultural exchange.

While the study highlights the predominance of negative portrayals, it also notes occasional positive depictions, which could create opportunities for enhanced

engagement and cooperation between Kazakhstan and Iraq. These findings hold implications not only for bilateral relations but also for understanding the broader mechanisms through which media influences foreign policy perceptions.

Future research could expand on this work by conducting comparative analyses across other Central Asian media outlets or exploring how these portrayals affect public opinion and policymaking. A deeper investigation into the factors shaping media narratives would further contribute to the discourse on international image-building and the media's influence in global affairs.

FUNDING

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

ZM: conceptualization, validation, writing of the methodological section, the discourse analysis of the interview, discussion section. JA: conceptualization, validation, introduction writing, thematic analysis of officially signed documents.

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