Iraq TV call-in show gives glimpse inside ISIS-occupied Mosul

**Erbil**

As evening approaches in Iraq's north, there is no breeze, and there is a crisis in the inhuman way the Daesh thugs treat the people of Mosul.

His callers – and there have been fewer of them lately – are civilians who have fled to Erbil, TV presenter Bair Mahmoud Mahdi said. He says allows victims of war to breathe.

His programme, called Freedom Studio, which he says allows victims of ISIS to vent.

While militants have been cracking down on communication tools, those reachable inside Mosul say at least some residents are able to access TV through satellite dishes and can pick up outside radio stations in parts of the city.

Mahdi usually goes from one phone call to another very quickly, giving words of encouragement to those calling in. He averages about 90 calls during each 2-hour show. Mahdi, who is from Ramadi, said he can empathise with the callers’ struggles since he has been through it himself in his own city. Ramadi was freed from ISIS militants earlier in the year.

While the show receives callers from Mosul, those numbers have started to drop because of harsh punishment by ISIS. On a recent day, most callers were displaced people from Mosul who wanted to send messages of hope to those trapped in the city. There was also a lot of praise for the Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

One displaced resident, identifying himself as Salah, said he wanted to send a message to his family still there.

“I want to tell the families in Nineveh that we are coming to save you from these Daesh thugs,” he said. “We are fighting against criminals, but we cannot reach them.”

The battle picked up momentum recently, with state-sanctioned Shia militias joining the offensive to the west of the city as part of a plan to encircle the area and cut supply lines from neighbouring Syria. Other Iraqi forces, aided by US-led air strikes and heavy artillery, drove ISIS from the town of Shura, south of Mosul, where militants had rounded up civilians for use as human shields.

**The TV show**

Freedom Studio allows victims of ISIS trapped in Mosul to vent.

While most of the fighting is taking place in towns and villages far from Mosul’s outskirts. With the operation expected to close out in the coming months, the Islamic State group has blighted the country.

The first thing to explore is a better defining of terms. What, for example, are Assad’s definitions of “civil war” and “terrorism” and does he think there is such a thing as “state terrorism”? Another option is to question his regular excuses such as blaming Turkey and other countries for the situation. Why did he previously go on holiday with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and have good relations with Ankara? What has changed?

The Associated Press

**Viewpoint**

While Syria President Bashar Assad’s forces and his allies continue to squeeze western Aleppo, the regime is looking to go on a public relations offensive. In recent weeks Assad and his representatives have been appearing far more frequently on Western media outlets, including the first appearance of his wife Asma Assad in a television interview in more than eight years.

In late October, several foreign journalists were granted meet-assad and even taken to the front lines of Aleppo. However, too often the questions are one-sided and the respected journalists fail to get through the armour of regime rhetoric.

Is this why the US is addressing the BBC, the Associated Press or other media, the consistency with which the regime has been using the Western media? Is there an orchestrated strategy of journalists and US and European correspondents?”

The most common tactic that Shaaban relies upon is that she is in Syria and they are not, so how dare they presume to know what they are speaking about.

In a recent interview with the UK’s Channel Four news these tactics were evident when Shaaban explained: “I am the one living in Syria. Please don’t lecture me from London.”

She also said that she does not believe any of those reports “from people who are not on the ground and that the ‘reports are irrelevant to our reality’.”

The fact that the regime limits media access into the country and that in non-regime controlled areas there is no place more dangerous to be a journalist is irrelevant to this mode of aggressive defence.

Bashar Assad tends to give long pre-recorded interviews with big names from print and television. The interviews often come across as quasi-academic discussions as Assad talks softly at length as to the situation as he sees it. While Shaaban ranges his voice and interrupts her interlocutors, Assad is more calm and almost laughs off awkward questions as he tells the BBC in 2015 that “There’s no barrel bombs.”

So what kind of questions would disrupt regime messaging and messengers? The first thing to explore is a better defining of terms. What, for example, are Assad’s definitions of “civil war” and “terrorism” and does he think there is such a thing as “state terrorism”? Another option is to question his regular excuses such as blaming Turkey and other countries for the situation. Why did he previously go on holiday with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and have good relations with Ankara? What has changed?

It would be interesting to ask why Syria is not giving financial support to UN agencies looking after Syrian refugees and to see if Assad has any empathy or feeling for those who have been forced from their homes.

Finally, showing proof during an interview, such as rejected UN requests for aid access, could force Assad out of the bubble of his own reality.

So far the best question I’ve seen raised was by Newsnight’s Evan Davis, who simply asked “What is the biggest mistake the regime has made?” Shaaban smiled poorly before asking “Are you really trying to avoid the question entirely.”

Davis asked the perfect question to a regime that relies on a consistent but essentially narrative that it holds no responsibility for the tragedy it has caused.

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