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Role of Media in Reflecting Halabja Chemical Attacks; Case Study: Keyhan Newspaper

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Abstract: Nowadays, everyone acknowledges the important and complex role played by media in political changes in national and international levels. Undoubtedly, different political parties and groups make the most of this power tool for governing and public polling purposes. Therefore, media can play a crucial role in reflecting important global news and events and aligning public opinion to agree or disagree such events. The complete reflection of Iraq chemical attacks to Halabja by Keyhan Newspaper, publishing in Islamic Republic of Iran, is an example of such efforts. This analytical study aims to evaluate Keyhan role in reflecting Halabja chemical attacks through library studies and review of the valid documents of Keyhan Newspaper. The current study tries to answer this question that what is the role of media in reflecting Halabja news? To this end, the first section of this paper reviews the history of Keyhan newspaper, as the studied case, and Halabja chemical attacks. Then, it evaluates the role of Keyhan in reflecting this event from different standpoints.

Keywords: Chemical Attacks, Halabja, Keyhan Newspaper, Media

INTRODUCTION

The scholars of communication sciences believe that the most important objective of the mass media is to attract and direct public opinion. Public opinion can be directed for different reasons including preservation of governance, benefiting from its socio-political applications, acquiring national benefits and public awareness and propaganda. Amongst others, “news and reporting” are the dominant and main objectives of mass media. Propaganda, and at the same time reporting, are among the roles to which media are committed to play in order to prove the legitimacy of everything. The role of Iranian newspapers in reflecting social events, especially Halabja chemical attacks is not an exception. In addition to broadcasting and reflecting news during Iran-Iraq war, Iranian newspapers would conduct normative propaganda associated with any possible event, especially Halabja chemical attacks, from their view.

Terminology

Chemical factors: refer to a group of toxic and deadly compounds in solid, liquid and gas (vapor) states triggering destructive or deadly effects and serious poisoning in living entities and destruct environment and plants. Toxic substances are absorbed into body through digestion, respiratory systems and via skin, impose destructive impacts on organs and immune system and result in destructive lesions in skin, and finally kill people. They are generally used to kill or induce chronic diseases (Nikhkhah Bahrami, 2010: 13).

Media: media can be generally referred to any tool or instrument used to reflect news. Visual Television, satellite channels and audial radio channels, newspaper and journals are different types of media. Recently, the Internet and social media have been widely incorporated into media.

Keyhan newspaper: Preceded only by Ettelaat newspaper, Keyhan is the oldest newspaper of Iran that is currently being published. The first number of Keyhan was published in Tehran in 1943 and it has been successively published until now, excluding three suspensions in 1944. In the second half of 2015, The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance ranked Iranian newspapers in terms of their performance where Keyhan ranked the 8th with a high score (Doniaye Eghtesad, 2051; no.: 4268). The first number of Keyhan, as the substitution of Ayande Iran newspaper, was published in Tehran in 1943 with Abdul-Rahman Faramarzi as owner and Mostafa Mesbahzade as editor in chief. In the 20th January of the same year, they replaced by each other during the extension of Keyhan permit (Faramarzi hasan, 1999: 25). The latest editor in chief, until Iran revolution, was Amir Taheri. By approaching Iran revolution in 1978, a new council of editor in chief was formed with Rahman Hatefi as the leader (Amini Najafi. Ali, 2005). During the Pahlavi regime, Keyhan was the voice of its society in all important events of those days including relative freedom of journals after the fall of Reza Shah, bread starvation, scolds and punishments of Ghavam's cabinet, Mosaddegh premiership, nationalization of oil industry, 1953 Iranian coup d'état, public protests and 1978 revolution (Javanroodi younes, 1980: 35). After Iran revolution, Keyhan became an integral organ of this revolution and was directly administered by the state. In the second half of 1970s, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami along with a new team headed by Mashaallah Shams-al-Vaezin was appointed to Keyhan. They could blow a new soul to Keyhan. In early 1980s, Hasan Shariatmadari was appointed as the managing editor of keyhan continued until now.

Geography of Halabja

Halabja is located in the northwest of Iran between two northern rings (25-36) (Firooz Hasan Halabjaei, 2003: 2-4) 76 Km from the southwest of Sulaymaniyah (Abdollah Ghafoor, 2003: 114) with an altitude of 736m (Fahmi Hammah Tofigh, Khazan, 2003: 28).

Topographically, Halabja is located in the southwest of Sharizor plain (Firooz Hasan Halabjaei, 2003: 60) surrounded by several mountains including Surin, Sheram, Rangin, Shenroy, Be-fri-miri and Balanboo. There are many gardens and orchards around Halabja (Ali Seido Gahravani, 2000: 63). Halabja has a satisfactory climate with high and beneficial precipitation with an annual rate of 750mm (Hakim Mollhsaleh, 2011: 90).

History of Halabja name

Halabja has had many different names including:

- A) **Har Har:** Halabja was first called Har Har. Later, Sarkonakdi occupied Halabja and Shahrizor and changed Har Har to KarSharokin, which means the city of Sarkon (Marduk, 1958: 51).
- B) **Halouja:** it is argued that the word of Halabja is derived from *Halouja* because Halabja had lots of Hakouja (drupelet). The proof of this is that the villagers located around Halabja call Halabja as Haloucha, which is very close to Halouja (Shah-ve-Ket Haji Moshir, 1988: 51).
- C) **HatLavJia:** this word is composed of two parts: 1) Hatlav + Jia which means the place of Hatlav. It is supposed that HatLav-khan (Ardalan) was ruling this region for a while (Hakim Mollasaleh, 2011: 37).
- D) **AtjatbJai:** this word means incredible and surprising place. Halabja has very ideal climate and prolific lands (Hakim Mollasaleh, 2011: 21).
- E) **Halab:** some believe that Kermanshah people used to go to Halab in Syria for trading purposes. They would cross this region and recognize that the weather of this region is very similar to that of Halab in Syria. Therefore, they called this region Halabja, i.e. small Halab (Bekr Hama Seddigh, 1997: 6).
- F) **Alabja:** this word is composed of two parts: Alab + ja. It means the place of Alab who was very powerful man of Seljuk Dynasty (Mohammad Amin Zaki: 2006: 15).

Some believe, however, that Holookhan, the King of Ardalan, made Halabja city and called it Haluji which means Place of Holoo (peach). Holookhan's naming backs to 1610-1615 (Nahro Esmaeili Zandi, History journal,

no. 3, 2007: 295). Another group argues that “*Jaf*” tribe¹ founded Halabja after 1700. This tribe came from Javanrood in Iran 100 years ago and stayed in Halabja. This occurred after *Zahab Agreement* on the consolidation of boundaries. This agreement caused *Jaf* tribe to look for another place and Halabja was the best place for them and this city was constructed for this reason (Bekr Hama Sedigh, 2007: 7). Some argue that the foundation of Halabja backs to 1850-1860 during Ottomans period (Sheida Mohammad Amin, 88 journal, no. 5-6, 2006: 24).

Halabja is one of the oldest cities of Kordestan, Iraq with ancient history. It was ruined frequently and finally was flourished by *Hamachawsh* tribe around 1650 (1650-1750) (Atyoub Rewstam, 2004: 36). Assisted by three of his sons (Piro, Soleyman and Evla), *Hamachawsh*, who had several sons and nephews and 13 houses, formed Halabja. Currently, all members of this tribe stay in these 13 reputable homes (Sheto ket Haji Moshiri, 1998: 51). It can be argued that gardening and agricultural activities were started by these 13 homes in this region. They generally cultivated wheat and barley and this region was flourished by these activities (Hakim Mollasaleh, 2011: 11).

Saddam’s chemical attacks to Halabja were widely reflected in regional and international media. Most media tried to broadcast this human stampede. Amongst others, Keyhan tried to show the reality to the world from different points of view. This paper tries to evaluate these views. Relying on the international reports, Keyhan first tried to attract the attention of the world community to this drastic event and to convert it to an international problem or even make the world community to condemn it. As the national media of Iran, Keyhan published in its 13281 no. the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations and wrote: “the Secretary-General of the United Nations and European economic society condemn Iraq for use of chemical weapons against Iran and Iraq people” (Keyhan, 13281: 3). Keyhan called for an incisive decision and continued: “Although Javier Perez de Cuellar, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, condemned yesterday Iraq’s using chemical weapons against Iran and Iraq people, he has not made a decisive decision about delegating a specialist team to the region” (Keyhan, 13281: 3). Keyhan outlined the mortality statistics and financial damages of this event in which at least 5000 residents of this city were killed. Citing from Mohammad Jafar Mahallati, Iran ambassador in the UN, Keyhan called for delegating a specialist team to the region because Keyhan believed that any delay may result in unsatisfactory results. Therefore, Keyhan expressed in the same number that: “if the UN specialist team do not attend to this region, the negotiations requested by the UN will be useless” (Keyhan, 13281:3). It should be noted that The UN asked both Iran and Iraq to delegate representatives to New York in order to negotiate about closing the war. Therefore, Keyhan asked The UN to condemn Iraq and introduce it as the country committed war crime. This could be beneficial for Iran in the negotiations.

In the same number, Keyhan headline was the meeting of Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe and the head of nonaligned movement, with Iran ambassador in Zimbabwe. Keyhan outlined that the position of this movement is the condemnation of the attacks and called for the castigation of Iraq for several times. Keyhan wrote: “in his meeting with Farhad Shahabi, Iran ambassador in Zimbabwe, Mugabe condemned the attacks and said that this anti-humanity crime is not acceptable by common-sense” (Keyhan, 13281: 3).

In order to further reflect the chemical attacks from international point of view and to attract the attention of public opinion to them, Keyhan just reflected the reactions and initiatives of Iran senior authorities. It published the letter of Iran parliament speaker to the parliament speakers of other countries and wrote: “Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran parliament speaker, send a letter to all parliament speakers of the world and explained them the details of Iraq crimes in Halabja and asked them to condemn massacre of civilian by Ba’ath regime” (Keyhan, 13282: 2). Consequently, Keyhan assigned its headline to the interview of Iran prime minister in order to announce that Iran not only condemns this crime, but also it insists with utmost power on the

¹ Jaf tribe is an Iranian and Eastern Iraqi Kurdish tribe. In Iran, Jaf tribe stays at Kermanshah Province and generally in Shivesar, Lalashi and Makuan rural district and in Mansur Aghaei of the central part of Pave city. In Mansur Aghaei and Zamkan rural districts, their transhumance occurs only in winters while in other districts it occurs both in winters and summers

vindication of the rights of oppressed people. In the same number, Keyhan quoted from Mirhosein Musavi: “we are awaiting the reaction of the United Nations Security Council to Iraq crimes in Halabja though the realization of justice is seen in none of the decisions and behaviors of international organizations” (Keyhan, 13282: 2).

To realize its objective, which is the reflection of the painful event of Halabja from international standpoint, Keyhan provided a report titled “wide global reactions to the tragic crime of Ba’ath regime in Halabja” and wrote: “the intensification of attacks to Iran residential areas and the massacre of Iraqi civilians in Halabja by chemical bombs have offered completely inverse results to Iraq Ba’ath-Zion regime and have dissatisfied the supporters of Iraq in The UN security council (Keyhan, 13282: 2). By collecting reports and news from foreign newspapers about condemnation of Halabja chemical attacks, Keyhan tried to reflect the severity of this catastrophic event from international point of view. The blackout of some foreign newspapers and media offended Keyhan and it strongly denounced this blackout. In addition, Keyhan believed that the media intentionally censor relevant news as they are organized by imperialistic regimes, according to Keyhan. Keyhan wrote: “following one week deathful global blackout of imperialism media, some of Zion-American media in recent days, reflected Iraq chemical attacks to Halabja which killed thousands of innocent people, following the reflection of news in other western countries” (Keyhan, 13283: 9). Furthermore, Keyhan tried to reflect the painful event of Halabja in literary and epic frameworks. It published epic and emotional poems in different numbers and tried to show the depth of this tragedy. In addition to recalling the depth of tragedy and showing the frightening aspect of it, Keyhan tried to obtain national and international favorable view to this city. A poem titled “Halabja” says:

Oh Halabja!

I will throw your soil all over the earth
To let flowers wither when memorize you
Halabja!

I will carry your air to any land
To let everyone have a heart break, a heartache and a tear in eyes
Halabja!

I will take your innocent children rolling in their blood to the UN, to the Security Council and to Red Cross to teach the international bill of the rights of man (Keyhan, 13282: 2)

Keyhan published in another number, a poem titled “stand up Tara”. This poem induces the depth and pain of this tragedy to readers allowing them know how children were treated in this city and how their calm was disturbed in order to be a remedy on thousands of injuries. The poem of “stand up Tara” memorizes female children who were killed due to the bomb attacks of Saddam. The poet presents this poem to all killed children of Iraq:

Stand up Tatra!

There is a bird in your chest
There is the boom of airplane in the sky
There is a hope in your heart and black cloud cries
Life blossom and crystal in your hands and
Suddenly!

Bomb rains!

Oh Tara!

You jumped, twisted and fell
And your blood flow became the steam of the earth spring pool
You turned to an angel
And your hair fell over the warm pan of spring fired eggs

With a bloody scarf, resembling a flag over a fence
Oh Tara!
Stand up again and see that
Sound barrier of life is broken everyday
Stand up!
Let blossom grow from your life shoot
Sing morning marsh with devotion instrument, with your pure blood
Write always:
“Long live freedom”

After chemical attacks to Halabja, there were many reactions across the world to this crime of Baghdad state. Not only many countries condemned it, but also many street protests were held against it. Keyhan did not ignore this and widely covered it by publishing the news and pictures of such street protests. In a number, Keyhan published the street protests of Tehran-resident Kurdish in front of the UN office in Tehran and wrote: “this morning, Iraqi Kurdish held street protests in Tehran streets in front of Red Cross office in Tehran to show their sympathy with Iraqi people and to condemn this anti-humanity action of Baghdad governors” (Keyhan, 13285: 16). In the same number, Keyhan headline was “global protest rises against the massacre of Halabja people” and named Halabja as “the second Hiroshima” and continued: “following the most recent crime of Iraq regime i.e. chemical attacks to Halabja and massacre of 5 thousand innocent females and children, a major part of news and papers of the international reputable journals still cover this great crime of the century” (Keyhan13285: 3).

Medical issues and treatment of injured people were other important issues reflected by Keyhan. It evaluated the opinions and views of *Doctors without Borders* about Halabja chemical attacks on the one hand and reflected injured treatment practices, the critical condition of injured people and medical services provided to them on the other hand. In a number of Keyhan dated 27 Mars, 1988, Keyhan reflected the position of Doctors without Borders and the UN team and wrote that this team confirms Iraq use of chemical bombs in Halabja. It wrote: “Yesterday, the delegated team of Doctors without Borders, who travelled to Iran to visit Halabja, explained their observations of Halabja chemical attacks to national and international journalists in a TV/Radio conference. The members of this team emphasized that the fallen city of Halabja has been widely attacked by chemical bombs of cyanide and mustard gas type (Keyhan, 13282: 3). In the same number, Keyhan reflected in a headline the visit of the medical team of Doctors without Borders to the injured people of Halabja admitted in Tehran hospitals and wrote: “the members of a medical team of “Doctors without Borders” who came to Tehran to more survey the effects of Iraqi regime crimes in Halabja and to visit injured people, visited them in Baghiyat-allah Hospital” (Keyhan, 13282: 3).

The treatment of injured people in Iran, and especially in European countries and America, was an important medical-therapeutic service provided to mitigate injured people pains. Iran dispatched the injured people to European countries in order to treat them on the one hand and to have an ace up its sleeve on the other hand by which Iran could prove its claim about Iraqi use of chemical weapons. Keyhan continued its professional wide activities in this regard and reflected the dispatch of injured people to foreign countries and explained treatment procedures. In a number, Keyhand headline was the dispatch of the injured people of Halbjja tragedy to European countries and America. It mentioned the name of the people and wrote: “This morning, in the presence of the authorities of Martyr Foundation, 29 injured people of Halabja dispatched to several European countries and America. They generally were from innocent civilian and many females and children are among them” (Keyhan 13284: 3). The treatment of injured people only by Iran was not a simple intervention. Therefore, Iran called for international societies to cooperate with Iran and accept the treatment of injured people. Keyhan reflected this news and in its headline and wrote: “Iran invites international societies to treat injured people of Halabja”. Keyhan quoted from Iran Red Crescent head and wrote: “the treatment of injured people is a very

difficult task and this is a completely specialized treatment procedure...The crime is very serious and the number of injured people is very high and we are not able to treat all of them in our hospitals” (Keyhan 13284: 3).

Conclusion

During Iran-Iraq war, Baghdad regime frequently used weapon of mass destruction against Iran, and even its nation, and attacked many Iran-Iraq border regions with chemical weapons. The innocent and oppressed nation of its own country was not an exception. Halabja is a city subjected to the chemical attacks of Iraq regime. More than 5 thousand females and children were killed in the attacks. The reflection of these attacks by different media enjoys an utmost importance. Each media reflected these attacks in different normative ways. Meanwhile, Keyhan played an effective role in reflecting this event. Aligned with the top policies of Islamic Republic of Iran, Keyhan tried to completely and comprehensively reflect realities. It reflected the attacks from different standpoints. Iran efforts for global condemnation of this crime were well-reflected in this newspaper. In addition, Keyhan widely reflected the assists and services provided by Iran in this regard. In another section, Keyhan evaluated the status of injured people and tried to reflect this painful drastic event by impressive slogans and words.

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