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# **Fake News and Disinformation in Iraqi Social Media Platform: Representational and Argumentation Analysis**

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# **Fake News and Disinformation in Iraqi Social Media**

## **Platform: Representational and Argumentation Analysis**

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With the spread of the technology and social media platforms and without successful fact-checking procedures that can verify and eliminate all fake news, everybody can be exposed to a daily dose of misleading and false content that can be risky. Such disinformation is often a means of political gain when there is a political divide as in the 2016 US presidential election (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). The 2018 Iraqi election is not exception in this regard. Thus, this study aims to explore disinformation practices and mechanisms in Iraq and how political blocks, or individual candidates are targeted on social media platforms .The data was collected from a Facebook page called 'تقنية من اجل السلام Tech 4 Peace' which is designated to expose the fake

news and lies spread on social media in Iraq. To achieve this aim, Wodak and Meyer (2016) Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been used as a framework for the analysis. Having categorized the fake news according to their themes, the results showed the fake news focuses on sensitive cultural topics as religion, reputation. honour as well as an accusation of candidates of being agents/proxies to other countries. Such themes were utilized to attack, (dis)credit, (de)legitimize political and religious opponents.

Keywords: Facebook, Fake News, Disinformation, Iraq, Critical Discourse Analysis, Politicians, Religion

## ملخص :

فضح الأخبار الكاذبة والأكاذيب المنتشرة على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي في العراق. لتحقيق هذا الهدف ، تم استخدام Wodak and Meyer (٢٠١٦) النهج التاريخي للخطاب (DHA) لتحليل الخطاب النقدي (CDA) كإطار للتحليل. بعد تصنيف الأخبار المزيفة وفقاً لموضوعاتها ، أظهرت النتائج أن الأخبار المزيفة تركز على مواضيع ثقافية حساسة مثل الدين والسمعة. تكريم اوتاهام المرشحين بأنهم وكلاء / وكلاء لدول أخرى. وتم استخدام هذه المواضيع لمهاجمة وتشويه سمعة ونزع الشرعية عن المعارضين السياسيين والدينيين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** فيسبوك ، أخبار كاذبة ، تضليل ، العراق ، تحليل الخطاب النقدي ، سياسيون ، دين

مع انتشار التكنولوجيا ومنصات التواصل الاجتماعي وعدم وجود إجراءات ناجحة للتحقق من الحقائق التي يمكنها عن طريقها التحقق من جميع الأخبار المزيفة والقضاء عليها ، يمكن أن يتعرض الجميع لجرعة يومية من المحتوى المضلل والكاذب الذي يمكن أن يكون محفوفاً بالمخاطر. غالباً ما تكون مثل هذه المعلومات المضللة وسيلة لتحقيق مكاسب سياسية عندما يكون هناك انقسام سياسي كما حدث في الانتخابات الرئاسية الأمريكية لعام ٢٠١٦ ( Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). وفي هذا الصدد فإن الانتخابات العراقية في عام ٢٠١٨ ليست استثناء. وبالتالي ، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف ممارسات وآليات المعلومات المضللة في العراق وكيفية استهداف الكتل السياسية أو الأفراد المرشحين على منصات التواصل الاجتماعي و

## Introduction

Fake news can play a significant role in (re)shaping public opinion towards a particular issue or a group of people. In Iraq, as with many other countries, Facebook in particular has become increasingly a platform for political communication and debates especially during election times. Unlike other social media platforms, Facebook overtook YouTube by July 2019 and has become the second most popular social media platform in Iraq (GlobalStats 2019). Social media has become effective in election as it enables candidates to develop their campaign with the recent and new technology rather than the old-fashioned ways of campaigning. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) say that sometimes a person with no reputation or no track can

get as many readers as the well-known news outlets and channels like Fox News, New York Times, or the CNN.

With the Iraqi parliamentary elections approaching, the social media is witnessing an increasing activity of what has come to be known as electronic armies: social media accounts involved in (dis)information campaigns for/against certain political actors, promoting their partisans and racing exclusionary discourses against opponents. The Iraqi 2018 elections mark Iraq's fourth parliamentary elections since the US-led invasion of Iraq. However, unlike the 2014 and 2010 elections when the political scene was run by large coalitions, the 2018 election was even more fractured by the intra-sectarian division and fragmented Shiites, Sunni and Kurdish factions. Such



fragmentation and disagreements are also reflected in the social media discourse.

Many fake news on Facebook platforms served to expose and demarcate politicians and political candidates during the election period and even months earlier before the official start. As a result of such fake news campaigns, a number of candidates did not withstand the campaigns of accusations and defamation they faced, forcing them to withdraw from the election race to protect themselves and their reputation. The fake news included various charges and amounted to the fabrication of images and videos of a scandalous nature: e.g. pornographic videos attributed to Iraqi candidates for parliamentary seats in the next House of Representatives. Even some international TV stations like Arabia fell in the trap of this fake news and circulated some faked images of the candidates, which exacerbated the negative presentation of such candidates.

Therefore, it is the aim of this article to examine the issue of fake news in Iraqi social media through answering the following research questions: What are the main topics fake news producers focused on? How were fake news utilized to discredit, (de)legitimize political and religious opponents?

### **1.1 Fake News: Background**

Fake news is not a new phenomenon as falsely claimed by Donald Trump when he said that he first used and invented it (CNNBusiness 2017) but it has only become a global buzzword in the last few years when it has attracted more attention over the heated debate over the 2016 US election and the alleged threat to the democracy posed by such phenomenon (Farkas and Schou 2018). Between Nov-Jan 2016 people in the US have googled the phrase Fake news more than the years

2014 and 2015 combined (Google Trend 2019). It has been described as 'a plague on the web' (CNNBusiness 2017) and Hilary Clinton described it as 'epidemic of malicious fake news' (Wendling 2018).

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the issue of fake news and from different perspectives, focusing on the challenges of automatic fake news detection and the attempt of building an automatic fake news module detectors (e.g. Pérez-Rosas, Kleinberg et al. 2017, Wang 2017) or highlighting the difficulty for social media users to spot and distinguish fake news (e.g. Shellenbarger 2016, Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016). Studies have also looked at the impact of fake news, not only with respect of causing a confusion to readers (Barthel, Mitchell et al. 2016) but also to the influence they have on the election results (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). The phrase 'Fake News' itself has also received the attention of researchers. Farkas and Schou (2018) argue that whereas many media outlets have used the term *fake news* to refer to the intentional and misleading information disseminated online. The term has become a 'floating signifier' and utilized by different political actors to discredit and delegitimize other political opponents.

Researchers have come up with different terminologies to differentiate between the types of the false information. For instance, scholars as (Floridi 1996, Skinner and Martin 2000) have used disinformation and misinformation interchangeably. Others as (Tudjman and Mikelic 2003, Karlova and Fisher 2013) used misinformation to refer to all kinds of information that is misleading whereas disinformation as the false information that is produced and circulated intentionally. Giuliani-Hoffman (2017) spoke of this

false information and described it as 'information pollution'. She even rejected and censored the phrase 'fake news' describing it as "woefully inadequate" to describe the phenomenon. Unlike previous studies above, she distinguishes between three types of false information as mis-information' (information spread by people with no intentional harm), dis-information' (information spread by people with an intention to harm), and 'mal-information' (sharing of "genuine" information with the intent to cause harm).

Unlike other studies that examined qualitatively and quantitatively fake news to see whether there is a role by social media bots or any other parties in spreading the fake news and impacting the elections, this article examines the discourse of the fake news which are already classified as such by a Facebook group that fights fake news and rumors and to know the mechanisms of self-other representations strategies used to construct, (dis)credit political opponents. Also, this study is hoped to contribute to the knowledge of fake news in the Iraqi context as I believe that fake news practices may be different from other countries in many aspects and that depends on the country cultural values in which the fake news users focus on to influence the public opinion. Furthermore, the discourse of fake news is never investigated in Iraq, therefore, this paper could act as a springboard for other researchers to build on the fake news literature.

## **1.2 Politics and social media in Iraq**

The Iraqi 2018 elections mark Iraq's fourth parliamentary elections since the US-led invasion of Iraq. However, unlike the 2014 and 2010 election when the political scene was run by large coalitions, the 2018 election was even more fractured by the

intra-sectarian division and fragmented Shiites, Sunni and Kurdish factions. Although these factions are fractured, the political scene is still dominated by the same political players since 2005 (Ibrahim 2018). Shiites are divided into five separate coalitions in the election. Similarly Sunnis have also failed to agree to run under a single faction and were divided into two main divisions. Although the Kurds played a major role in deciding the prime minister and the president in earlier elections, they are now more divided. The elected members of the Council of Representatives (329) will be decided by the election who in their turn decide who will be the next prime minister and Iraqi president. 6990 candidates from 87 parties are competing against one another to be members of the council (Ibrahim 2018).

The 2018 election has delivered many messages about the status of Iraqi politics. The decision of many Iraqis to boycott the election and the low turnout appear to be a reflection of the malaise and disillusion with the status quo (Mansour and van den Toorn 2018). The Iraqi public has been divided into: those who want to vote, those who don't want, and those who are uncertain and thus reluctant. There have been many campaigns that launched Arabic hashtags urging to boycott the elections as **#اكد بالبيت** (# Stay\_home), **#حافظ على نظافة اصبعك** (#Keep\_your\_finger\_clean) urging people not to vote. The Iraqi people lacks basic services such as water and electricity and faces an increasing unemployment rates. The Iraqi people attributes this failure to the corrupted political system (Mansour and van den Toorn 2018). Therefore, the percentage of participation in the legislative elections reached 44.52% of the electorate as announced by The Independent High Electoral Commission

of Iraq (IHEC), the highest rate of abstention since the first multi-party elections in Iraq in 2005 (Deutsche Welle 2018).

Until recently, direct communication with voters, relying heavily on traditional methods, such as street advertising, printing small cards and distributing them to people or by campaigning were the most widely used means of campaigning in Iraqi elections. But this medium is no longer the only means to reach out to broader segments of society, especially in light of the growing use of technology by people and the high prevalence of social media. The majority of people are believed to be taking news from their Facebook accounts, so it is very likely that many of these people will use them to discuss political issues. In October 2018, there were 17 442 000 Facebook users in Iraq (comprising 42.4% of the entire Iraqi population) (Napoleoncat 2018) . Social media has become very effective in the Iraqi politics in a way that the whole internet was shut down for more than 20 days in October 2019 amid a fear of protest spreading where the protest included many cities in all over Iraqi demanding better life, more services, and higher employment rates.

### **1.3 Methodology**

#### **1.3.1 Data Collection**

The data collected came from a Facebook page called “Tech 4 Peace التقنية من اجل السلام” which stated its mission as “To Expose Lies, Spread Truth & Protect Individual Privacy”. The Iraqi parliamentary election began on Saturday, May 12, 2018. However, the campaigns started much more earlier. The official date for launching the campaigns was Saturday, April 14, 2018. However, they started even before that through targeting individuals and the parties they belong to or promoting

their partisans. Therefore, it has been decided that collection of the data starts from the day such fake news started to appear in the “Tech 4 Peace التقنية من اجل السلام” page i.e. on January 1- June 1 in 2018. The data is in images and texts forms where the page contrasts the fake news/images with the real ones (see examples below). All the images along with the texts were downloaded and saved as an JPG form, then these images were categorized thematically. For example, images and texts that use religion in fake news were categorized as Religionization. In this study, Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017) fake news definition "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" has been adopted and in particular the posts that are politically incorrect and are constructed to deceive readers. Therefore, this definition rules out commercial fake news that change the fact to make sales and generate clicks and any other fake news that are not related to the election.

#### **1.3.2 Theoretical Framework**

In this section Reisigl and Wodak (2009)'s Discourse Historical Approach, concerned with the analysis of Self and Other representation discourse, is outlined briefly as a point of reference for the subsequent analysis of the data.

##### **1.3.2.1 Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)**

Developed at Vienna University by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues, DHA is an influential approach of studying the Self and Other representations in discourse. It has become concerned not only with the historical dimension of discourses but also with subjects such as discourse and discrimination, language barriers in various social institutions, discourse and politics, discourse and identity, discourse in the

media and organisational communication (Martin 2017).

In DHA, context is an essential part of the approach and it takes into the account four levels:

1. the immediate, language or text-internal co-text and co-discourse
2. the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses
3. the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frame of a specific 'context of situation'
4. the broader sociopolitical and historical context, which discursive practices are embedded in and related to.

On the level of operationalisation, according to Wodak and Meyer (2015), DHA is a three-dimensional discourse-analytical approach:

**1. *Identify the specific contents or topics of the discourse***

The aim of this macro analysis in the current study was to identify the topics and arguments of fake news discourse. Thus, fake news discourse (images and texts) have been categorized according to their themes /topics.

**2. *Investigate Discursive Strategies***

In order to investigate the discursive strategies by which social actors/events/objects were represented in particular ways, I followed three of the five questions along with their discursive strategies proposed by Wodak and Meyer (2016). The five strategies are nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, framing or discourse representation and intensification/migration. Only the first three that are most relevant to answer my research questions were selected and explained:

1. How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?

| Strategy   | Objectives                                                                                  | Devices                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| nomination | discursive construction of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership categorization devices, deictics, anthroponyms, etc.</li> <li>• Tropes such as metaphors, metonymies and synecodches (pars pro toto, totum pro parte)</li> <li>• verbs and nouns used to denote processes and actions etc.</li> </ul> |

**Table 1 Nomination Strategy**

Writing about how people are named or referred to in a discriminatory discourse involves the use of categorisation devices that serve to mark people as being either in-group or out-group (Blackledge, 2005, p. 21). The basic form of discriminating against persons or a group of persons is by “naming them derogatorily, debasingly or vituperatively” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2005, p. 45). The way people/social actors are viewed in real life is influenced to a great extent by

the way the news media name them. Choosing one name over another involves an exclusion or inclusion from other categories (Richardson, 2007a, p. 49), in doing so the namer could have an interest or a purpose that could be political, social or psychological (Reisigl and Wodak, 2005, p. 47).

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2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?

| Strategy    | Objectives                                                                                                              | Devices                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| predication | discursive qualification of social actors, objects, phenomena, events, processes and actions (positively or negatively) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(stereotypical) evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits (e.g. in the form of adjectives, oppositions, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, conjunctive clauses, infinitive clauses and participial clauses or groups)</li> <li>explicit predicates or predicative nouns/adjectives/pronouns collocations</li> <li>comparisons, similes, metaphors and other rhetorical figures (including metonymies, hyperboles, litotes, euphemisms)</li> <li>allusions, evocations, presuppositions/implicatures etc.</li> </ul> |

Table 2 predication strategy

The second important aspect of the self- and other-representation is the predicational strategies by which persons, animal, objects, events, actions and social phenomenon are linguistically assigned particular qualities which can be negative or positive (Reisigl and Wodak, 2005, p. 45).

### 3. Examine the Linguistic Means and Linguistic Realisations

3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?

Following on from the above brief discussion of referential and predicational strategies, it is worth mentioning here that both can be incorporated and integrated into argumentation to serve the aims of persuasion (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 34). Therefore, argumentation can be used to persuade an audience by representing 'self' as positive and the 'other' as negative and by drawing a line between 'us' and 'them'.

| Strategy      | Objectives                                                               | Devices                                                                                                |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| argumentation | justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>topoi (formal or content-related)</li> <li>fallacies</li> </ul> |

Table 3 Argumentation Strategy

## 1.4 Analysis

### 1.4.1 Reputation/Honour/Defamation

One of the strategies used in fake news is to personally target the candidates' ethos through targeting their honour and reputation. The ethotic topoi has been used largely during and before the election period to direct the audience to accept a negative proposed position and 'draw a

conclusion to a serious ethical failure in the agent's character, and to take that as an impugning of his credibility' (Walton 1996). Thus, in Figures (1,2) bellow, the ethotic appeal is used to attack two former politicians. In Figure 1 the appeal is based on the big similarity of the one in the real picture, who is speaking with a girl on camera and performing sexual acts, with

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one of the Iraqi candidates. The accompanying text says 'Breaking... The camera monitors the nobody Faek Shaik Ali undressing in front of the camera thinking that he is talking to a girl - No problem – a teenager MP'. Negative references were made to the candidate as 'the nobody' and 'a teenager MP' to construct him negatively and present him as not competent to be a member of the parliament. In this vein, Halliday's (1985) theory of Social Semiotics argues that how sometimes the meaning of words not only

depends on their own, but their meaning is part of a network of meaning. Therefore, mentioning "teenager" -can imply differences in the qualities of the opposites (teenager- adult) taking into consideration that teenagers in general are depicted routinely as troubled, troubling, and dangerous (Bernier 2011). Some description of the actions teenagers do were given in "undresses" as well as the total image implied meaning of performing sex.



Figure 1 Targeting reputation by similarity

In Figure 2, the visualization shows a mixed party with women's hair and part of their bodies uncovered accompanied with the text work as a representational strategy where the words choice and the positioning of the characters worked to represent the candidate negatively given a conclusion that the candidate in a place of dancing and prostitution a thing that is very cultural sensitive and can lead to the exclusion of

the candidate. The fabricated image on the right has undergone recontextualization 'the process of transferring given element/s [the candidate represented by his head which is indicated by the yellow arrow] to a new context' (Reisigl and Wodak 2009) to result that the element acquires a new meaning intended to be delivered to audience.



Figure 2 Targeting reputation by recontextualization

A construction that contradict what the candidate always portrays himself to the public as a religiously committed man. Many features were made in composition for the meaning to stand out for the public audience. The yellow arrow used to guide the audience where to look as well as mentioning the name of the person : Baqir Jabr Al-Zubeidi, an Iraqi politician. In a referential term, the text opened with a hashtag #immorals followed in the next line by some predications 'I saw you Haji Baqir Al-Zubeidi ... what are you doing there' the phrase 'I saw you' used to imply that he was doing something secretly and he was caught in action. 'Haji', is a reference for those who have done pilgrim to Makkah as well as for the old people, It is said sarcastically here as such actions is not expected from those people because they are supposed to be religiously committed. The word "there" is used to make a self and other construction through putting the politicians in the 'there' side i.e. the place of corruption and prostitution and I/we in here the good side.

#### 1.4.2 Composition and division arguments

Parliamentary elections' main lists were also targeted in the fake news through attacking their individual candidates in

what is called the fallacy of composition. In this fallacy, Pirie (2015) argues that 'what is true for the individual members of a class is also true for the class considered as a unit'. Among fake images, some were made to construct that some individual candidates are bad, therefore constructing the whole list to which these candidates are part of is also bad. It is fallacious to think that what is true or constructed to appear as true for individual must also be true as a unit which individuals collectively made up. In one of the fabricated images, a fictitious Facebook page, Figure 3, is alleged to belong to a former prime minister, Noori al- Maliki, who is now the head of one of the blocs, published a picture of him with one of the female candidates (picture on the right), whose scandalous sexual video just spread on the social media in the time of election. While he posed with a woman wearing hijab in the real photo, the fake one shows him with yet another one not wearing hijab. The former prime minster was already constructed negatively, and criticism was directed to him for not developing Iraq, corruption, poverty, unemployment and under his rule 1/3 of the country was taken over by ISIS.



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Figure 3 Fallacy of composition (1)

Another fake image, Figure 4, negatively constructs him through showing one of the famous Iraqi belly dancers as a candidate in his election block. Machin and Mayer (2012) say that people can be portrayed as individuals or as a group. They become

homogenised if they are constructed as a group and they are constructed to look like/ act like each other creating by such construction a 'they are all the same' or 'you can't tell them apart' impression.



Figure 4 Fallacy of composition (2)

On the contrary to the fallacy of composition, the fallacy of division is also used in the fake news posts to target both the block leaders and the candidates alike. In this fallacy, Berman (2019) argues that

'one infers that something true for the whole must also be true of all or some of its parts.' This fallacy was used to target the head of the blocks and its candidates by attacking their ethos and as a results



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targeting everyone who join such blocks. For instance, the civil party led by Faek Shaik Ali is generally constructed as liberal', anti- religion, atheist, corrupted and therefore anyone who joins his blocks carries the same characteristics and ideology. In figure 5, the fallacy of composition and division were joined together to negatively construct individuals therefore an image of one of the female

candidate altered with a semi- naked woman to target the block as well as everyone in this block and to validate the view that they are bad. Above the image, a comment was written says 'the civil party, the followers of Faek Shaik Ali the Atheist, the drunks, they strongly came to election this time hhhhh' 'a female candidate did not win yet opened the camera what she will open if she wins'



Figure 5 The fallacy of composition and division

Many references were made in the image as well as in the accompanying text as de-religionisation of candidates disassociating them from being Muslims and attributing them an atheist- like words as 'atheists'. Also, they were referred to in terms of temporary artificial alteration of bodily and mental capacity as 'drunks' and in terms of their sexual habits or orientation expressed in the images as well as the phrases 'they strongly came to election this time' and 'a candidate did not win yet opened the camera what she will open if she wins' as a sexual insinuation.

### 1.4.3 Saddamization (Baathization)

Lakoff and Johnson (2008) say that people and places can become symbols for actions and policy positions. The Ex presedit of Iraq Saddam Hussein, therefore, has

become synonymous for many Iraqis in general and Shiites in particular as a dictator, evil and symbol of oppression and racism. Therefore, by Saddamizing candidates, the fake news producers try to make a negative association. In figure 4, the argument from analogy- 'used to argue from one case that is said to be similar to another, in a certain respect' and therefore, the two cases can be judged as they are similar to each other (Walton 1996)- was used to argue that Al Hakim's, head of block, action is similar to Saddam's action which already have been constructed negatively so that the same action is said to be similar and as a result they are similar. The caption says 'find the difference' to imply that they are similar.



Figure 6 Saddamization of Candidates

The criminalization/demonization of candidates was also constructed by showing candidate's rough political alignment (polarization) to the Saddamite ideology (Baath ideology). This is what Wodak and Reisigl (2001, p. 53) term 'relationalisation' and 'sociativisation', i.e. the construction of individuals based on their relations/association to each other. In figure 10, the person (on the right) who shakes hands with Saddam is said to be one of the candidates described in the

photo as 'Comrade fighter' a terminology that is only and highly used among the Baath party members calling each other. This phrase is followed by another quote which says 'Our family (ancestors) say the man who changes his principles and is fickle become disreputable and naïve, the picture is an example'. Therefore, he was portrayed, in predication terms, as not a man of principles (inconsistent), 'fickle', 'disreputable' and 'naïve' therefore he is not worthy to be elected.



Figure 7 Political alignment

#### **1.4.4 Religionisation (to exclude candidates)**

Given what the religious clerks and the religious establishment enjoy of symbolic power that can influence the public and shape and reshape their opinion, this symbolic power, to a big extent, appealed to by fake news producers on social media discourse. Thus, here emerges the question of power from outside language: a type of power that comes to discourse from religion. As stated eloquently by Bourdieu (1991: 107):

The power of words is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson, and his speech - that is, the substance of his discourse and, inseparably, his way of speaking- is no more than a testimony, and one among others, of the guarantee of delegation which is vested in him.

Bourdieu argue that 'words are loaded with unequal weights' and that depends on the way they are said, and who utters them. He adds some words when uttered in a particular situation have an influence and force that could not have when they are uttered somewhere (Bourdieu 1991). In the same vein, Reisigl and Wodak (2009) say that 'language is not powerful on its own- it is a means to gain and maintain power by the use 'powerful people make of it'. For

any speech act to achieve its desirable results, the speaker should have an authority and pronounced by an appropriate person. It is therefore, the authority what makes the utterance carried out and performed (Chavan 2014).

Therefore, for the fake news producers to use merely fake news without appealing to the authority of religion or religious people might not be that effective when they are used alone. 'A performative utterance' as Bourdieu argues 'is destined to fail each time that it is not pronounced by a person who has the 'power' to pronounce it'. Therefore, the religionisation of fake news was one of the major themes that characterized the fake news in this period in order to target or support the candidates. In figure 8, although the photo is real, but it was interpreted in a way that the religious leader Murtada Alqizqini (pictured in front) is swaying and refuses to receive the chief of the Al-Hikma (Wisdom) party Ammar Al-Hakim and did not exchange greeting with him. Such construction is made to make the public to believe that he is outcast by the Marjaiaa and religious people which has an implication that he is not welcomed and therefore he should not be elected.



Figure 8 Religionisation (1)

In Figure 9, the famous and powerful Iraqi Shiites Marjaa Ali Al-Sistani was constructed that he has issued a fatwa that does not permit to elect the previous party

lists in the next elections neither to promote to them on the one hand and support the civil state rather than a religious parties on the other.



Figure 9 Religionisation (2)

### 1.4.5 Politicians as Proxies or Agents

#### 1.5.5.1 Normalization with Israel

Israel is already represented negatively in the mind of many Arabs as a 'Zionist entity' and usurping of an Arab land: Palestine and that it poses a threat to the Arab region in general and to the lives of the Palestinian in particular. In the 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index (2018), 90% of

the public opinion in the Arab world considered that Israel is a threat to the security and stability of the region. Therefore, normalizing with Israel or accusation of being an agent or an association to Israel is one of the strategies used to target Iraqi politicians linking them to what is already negatively constructed in the mind of many Iraqis.



Figure 10 Normalizing with Isreal

In Figure 10, it can be seen how some of the elements in the original image were replaced and re-contextualized to give a new meaning as if it is a meeting of the Shiite cleric, head of the list of wisdom, with Netanyahu. The Iraqi flag was replaced with the Israeli flag, and the other character in the original image on the right was replaced by Netanyahu, the fake image was accompanied by a text that says 'Ammar Al-Hakim's meeting with Netanyahu secretly'.

#### 1.5.5.2 Iran

The Iraq-Iran relationship has been marked by periods of alliance, rivalry and friction, which ended with a devastating war that broke out in 1980 and ended in 1988 (Bakhash, 2004, p. 11). This rivalry, for some historians, can be traced back to the rivalry in the pre-Islamic (Karsh, 2009, p. 5). Over time, Iran has been accused of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs especially after the fall of Saddam in 2003, by Arab leaders of seeking to establish an Islamic republic, and senior Iraqi officials of a range of illegal interference (election manipulation, support for the insurgency, and infiltration of the country). Evidence of Iran's involvement in Iraq has increased in recent years. The military assistance

provided by Iran to pro- Iran militias in Iraq in the form of funding, training and arming has attracted most of the attention. At the same time, Iranian intervention in Iraq has taken on several non-military dimensions. Iran seeks to form a Shiite-dominated state that shares Iran's interests, a country that does not threaten Iran's standing in the region and will be free of US influence.

A survey conducted by Alustakilla (IISCSS) (al-Dagher 2018) showed that there is a negative attitude towards Iran among Iraqi Shiites. The survey of nearly 3,500 Iraqis interviewed face-to-face over the past decade showed that the percentage of Iraqi Shiites loyal to Iran had fallen from 88 percent in 2015 to 47 percent by the fall of 2018, during which time the percentage of those opposed to Iran rose from 6 percent to 51 percent. According to al-Dagher, the majority of Iraqi Shiites have a negative attitude towards Iran, which undermines the stereotype of the Shiites that always tie them to Tehran. Iraqi Shiites, who believe Iran poses a real threat to Iraq's sovereignty, rose from 25% in 2016 to 58% in 2018 (al-Dagher 2018). In 2019, there were widespread protests in in the southern cities of Iraq and the capital

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calling to end the Iranian interference and their militias as well as their allies in the Iraqi parliament and the government. Having said that, associating Shiite political candidates with Iran and accusing them of being agents negatively constructs them. It is even worse off in the case of Sunni candidates due to the religious ideological differences between the Shiites and Sunnis. Therefore, the Sunni fake account that allegedly belong to one of anti-Iran Iraqi politician (Khalid al Obaidi) in Figure 11 wrote that 'In the past, we

were wrong to think of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but today it has proven that it is more keen on Iraq than other neighboring countries ... the coming days will prove that.' This text accompanied with a fake image showing him with an Iranian military officer is a way of targeting him through associating him with Iran and as a result change his image negatively in the mind of his supporters (Shiites and Sunnis) and not to vote for him.



Figure 11 Assosiating candidates with Iraq

### 1.4.6 Bait and switch

Another strategy for the fake Facebook pages during the election in Iraq to promote for the particular candidates is the sudden change of an already established Facebook page that has thousands of followers and likers to the names of some of election candidates. The followers find themselves suddenly following or liking a new page with a name different from the name they liked in the first place with a push of candidates' campaign adds. Such fake pages work on promoting and making campaigns for some candidates in a strategy similar to what is called bait and

switch fallacy which is a kind of equivocation in which the followers like a page that is of interest to them to hear or follow the news that are appealing to them as fashion pages, 'Iraqi videos', 'the job appointments in Iraq', 'Baghdad gatherings', 'Baghdad's mall', and sometimes these pages have the name of the audience cities and these pages give all the news related to such cities, but such pages used the audience interests as a bait to have more followers to switch later to pages that carry the candidates' names and start the campaigns. In figure 12 the page the audience liked 'Dyiala the city of peaceful



coexistence' has changed its name to the 'Victory coalition [one of the main parties in the elections] in Dyala'. Similarly, in Figure 13 the page has changed from 'the

news of the last job appointment in Iraq' to 'we are all Qais Al Musawi' another candidate.

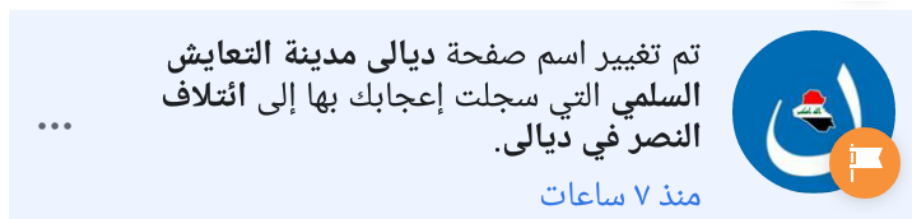


Figure 12 Change of name (1)

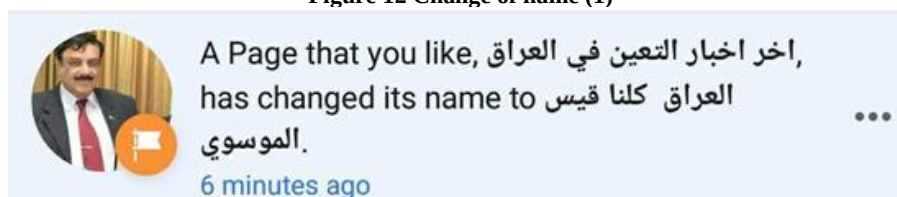


Figure 13 Change of name (2)

#### 1.4.7 Fake Polls as Fake News

So far, it has been seen how the fake news were disseminated in the Iraqi social media with different strategies. Fake polls is another strategy that can be added to the such strategies. Such polls were attributed to belong to highly reputational channels/T.V. or even sources that do not exist to earn audience trust to politically influence the public opinion in an attempt to change the voters behavior to vote to particular candidates or parties. There have been many fake polls that spread during the election. The polls have spread largely before and even during the election claiming the advancement of a particular politician over others. This strategy is an instance of the bandwagon fallacy by which people are urged to vote for a certain candidate because the majority of people support that candidate, or that candidate is popular.

#### 1.4.8 Trivialization of the election

In view of the fake news producers' discourse, there was a great tendency to

trivialize some political blocks in the elections in general and trivialize the whole election process in particular in order to call on people not to vote or abstain from the elections. This strategy was done through the use of people who are already known by their negative representation in the mind of Iraqi people as candidates for the elections, and these candidates are astrologers, witches and charlatans or dancers. Such allegations are based on statistics that are allaged to come from a recognized authority, namely the Electoral Commission in order to be believed and get credibility.

The Electoral Commission has been listed as an expert in election matters and has the knowledge and is in a position to know. Therefore, producers of the fabricated news use this argument in order to attribute their comment and gain more credibility as well as adding that such comments are based on pictures and videos. The figures are also used in this example to add more credibility and to look accurate. Pirie (2015) states that 'Both mathematics and

science [...] have prestige as a sources of authority' he adds that sometimes they are used 'to invest certain statements with the aura and prestige attaching to mathematics and science'. The fallacy of false precision 'derives from the use of unjustified material, and from the attempt to impart more confidence in the assertions than the evidence for them actually merits'. Pirie (2015) adds that 'the numbers used give a misleading impression of the confidence one can place in the claim'.

Extract 1.

"the election commission says that it excluded till now 73 female candidates for ethical reasons and based on the reports from honest people attached with pictures and videos as the following.??

40 prostitutes.?

9 owners of hairdressing Salon allocated for prostitution.?

14 women have prostitution message.?

10 female pimps.?

As if those who already existed in the earlier elections are honorable first grade??

What a parliament nobody nominate is honorable..!"

Equally important is to refer to these candidates with a negative reference in terms of their sexual orientation or habits therefore have been referred to as prostitutes, female pimps. Those who are targeted with honour and reputation are affected by the way society views such negative references, which are considered to be big sins in the society. Therefore, the representation in such a way is to put down those candidates and scare the rest of the female candidates of being targeted and stigmatized with such accusations that can threaten their life or even cost them their life.

## **1.5 Conclusion**

The present study was set out to answer the research questions: What are the main topic fake news producer focused on? How are fake news utilized to discredit, (de)legitimize political and religious opponents in the time of election? The investigation of fake news discourse has shown that the fake news producers have focused on the important, effective and sensitive topics in the context of Iraqi society that if believed would influence the public opinion towards particular politicians or candidates and eventually the rejection and the exclusion of such individuals. The focus was primarily on religion where religion discourse played a key role in the previous elections in the rise of many politicians, therefore, alleged faked fatwas by famous religious figures, faked photos and texts were used to exclude some on the one hand and to promote others on the other.

This study has also shown that the fake news have resorted to vilify some candidates through Saddamizing them in reference to Saddam Hussein. Because Saddam has gained a negative construction in terms of the wrongdoing and of criminal acts acted by him and his fellows. However, the use of this strategy has been used with or without any basis that is to say it has become a strategy to silence/ mute (non)political opponents for merely their opinions/ethnic/ religion etc.

Furthermore, honour/ reputation is another important topic that used to personally target the candidates ethics in the fake news discourse and this was done through constructing them engaged in/performing sexual acts, or are said to have unfaithful sexual affairs, or dancing in mixed gender parties, or for the block list leaders to have female belly dancers, prostitutes, drinkers in their list. Honour is very sensitive topic



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in Iraq and in many other ethnic groups of Muslim especially for woman which caused many to withdraw from the election amid fear ending up accused of honour.

The fake news has not been free from accusing politicians and candidates of being proxies/agents to other countries. Politicians were accused of their relationship with Israel, which is characterized by the negative construction by many Iraqis as an aggressor/rapist country that occupied an Arab country. Therefore, such a negative association

could be reflected negatively and affect the politicians image in from of the electorates. Similarly, many were linked to Iran due to the negative image of Iran in the view of many Iraqis throughout history as well as Iran's interference in Iraq's internal affairs directly or indirectly through the parties that were once in Iran as an opposition in Saddam regime time and many of them took power after 2003 but failed to provide basic needs and living standards to the Iraqi people.

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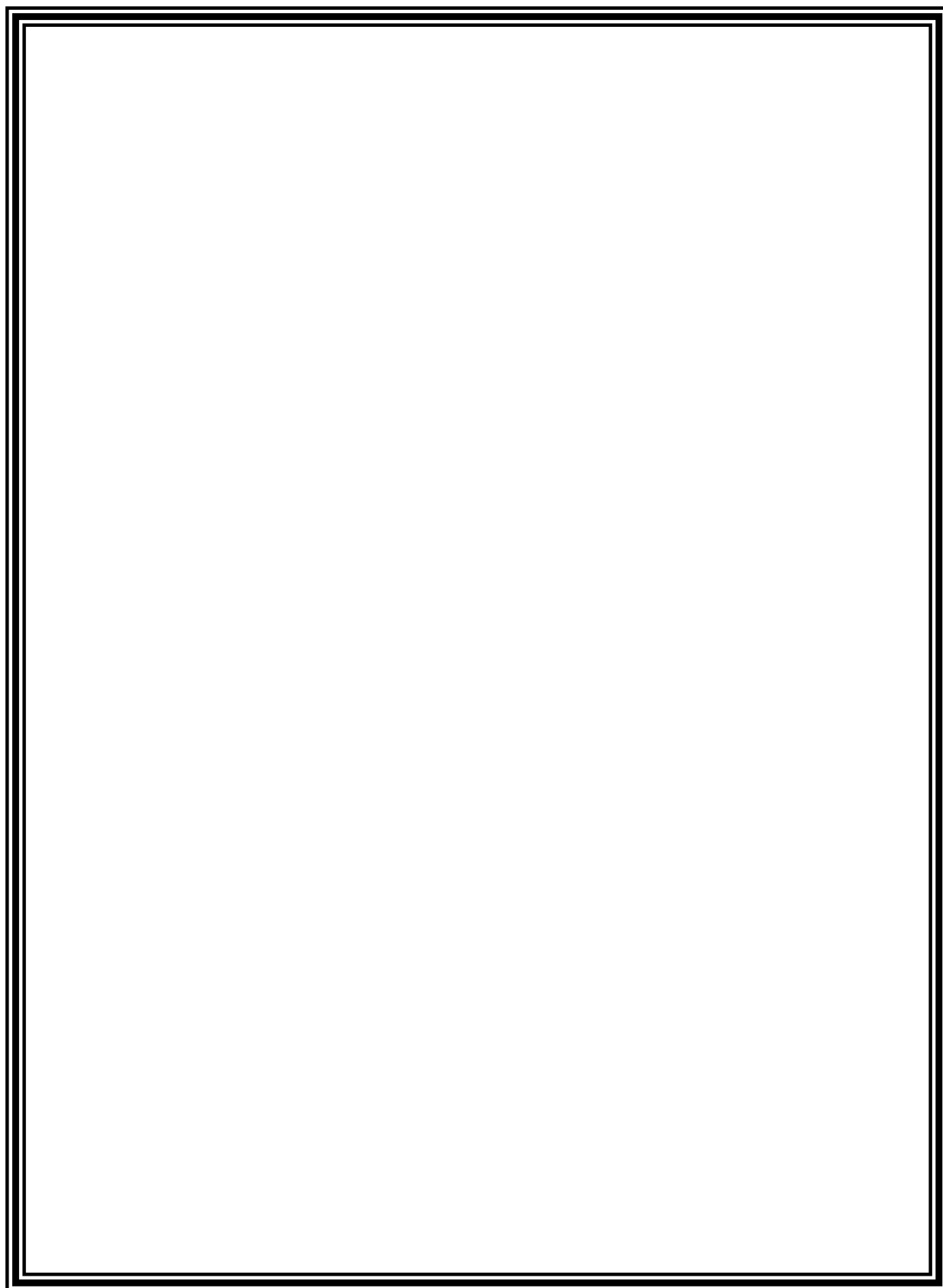
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