

Iraqi Elections: Media Disinformation on Voter Turnout?

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Global Research, January 31, 2005
19 June 2005

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)
In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Ongoing preliminary Report, 2.37 EST, 31 January 2004 (revised 2.30 EST)

The media in chorus decided that voter turnout was high.

Western governments and the international community confirmed that the turnout was high, based on contradictory official figures and statements:

“a **high turnout** in today’s election” (BBC, 30 Jan).

“polling stations witnessed an unexpectedly high turnout, demonstrating the Iraqi people’s eagerness for liberty and democracy, which is exactly the outcome that the United States wishes for the Iraqis”

“The French government hailed Iraq’s first free elections in half a century as a “great success for the international community” and called the **surprisingly high voter turnout** “good news”.

“The initial figures **included surprisingly high voter numbers** around central Iraq where the rebels have carried out attack after attack.”

The turnout figure was first put at 72 percent quoting official sources, at least two hours before the closing of the polls.

“Early figures on the turnout **exceeded even the most optimistic forecasts - 72 per cent of voters.**”

“Correspondent’s report from Baghdad says turnout unexpected. Cites Election Commission officials as saying 95 per cent of Baghdadis voted. He says **overall percentage is 72 per cent.** Heavy security measures in Baghdad. Praises organization of elections and employees attitude.”

“Polling places across Iraq have just closed. And despite some terror attacks, an Iraqi election official says **72 percent** of eligible voters have gone to the polls, but that has not been confirmed.” (Fox New, (9.00 EST, 14.00 GMT)

Where was this 72 percent figure taken? On what was it based? How was it derived?

By the time this figure started circulating in the global news chain, voting booths had not yet closed.

The 72 percent turnout figure, which was on the lips of journalists and network TV talk shows, was based on an interview with the Minister of Planning in the interim government, on the 30th at 11.45 GMT, more than two hours before the closing of the polls:

“although a 72 per cent turnout was expected, it appears that the participation level will only reach 50 per cent.” (1145 gmt, Al-Iraqiyah live satellite interview with Planning Minister Mahdi al-Hafiz, from the Conference Centre in Baghdad, BBC Monitoring, 30 Jan 2005) .

In fact, the 72 percent figure, quoted by journalists was not based on anything concrete.

An hour later, a senior official of the Independent Electoral Commission in Iraq (IECI), Adil al-Lami, repeated the same 72 percent figure. at a news conference at 12.24 GMT in which Adil al-Lami, and Safwat, another IECI official, provided very precise figures on voter turnout for the 18 governates (see Table below).

At this news conference, overall **voter turnout was placed at 72 per cent and in some areas 90 per cent.**

After the polls had closed and another news conference was held, the same senior IECI official stated that he expected the voter turnout to be **60 per cent.**

How was this last figure arrived at, without the counting of the ballots?

Why was it 72 per cent and then, two hours later it was revised to 60 percent?

With shattered communications systems, how did the information get transmitted so quickly to the IECI for release at a News conference at 14.00 GMT?

When questioned, a senior IECI official was evasive regarding the source and methodology underlying his figures (see complete interview in annex):

“These estimates are what they (the offices) have seen, their observations and their feelings,” Lami said. “These estimates are based on human flow at their polling stations.”

On what did the percentages that were announced at the news conference depend? Were they based on the flow of people only?

(Ayyar) Yes, on the basis of the flow of people and the expectations in front of the polling centres at many places throughout Iraq and also some contacts with the presiding officers of these centres, whether in the north, the south or the centre. The person who announced these figures did not say that they were final figures. So far, we have no results for the elections. The counting is taking place right now. I heard that Al-Sharqiyah knows some things, which we do not know.(Iraqi Al-Sharqiyah TV, 30 January)

“At a press conference Ayar backtracked on his earlier figure, saying the turnout would be nearer 60 percent of registered voters. The earlier figure of 72 percent, he said, was “only guessing” and “just an estimate” that had been based on “very rough, word of mouth estimates gathered informally from the field.” He added that it will be some time before the IECI can issue accurate figures on the turnout. “Percentages and numbers come only after counting

and will be announced when it's over," he said. "It is too soon to say that those were the official numbers." (Dahr Jamail, http://www.dahrjamailiraq.com/hard_news/archives/hard_news/000192.php#more)

Figures based on "observations", "feelings", "word of mouth" "guessing". Yet these are the figures quoted with authority by governments and news reports around the World:

And a few hours later, the news reports start shifting. First it was 72 percent, then 60 percent, then it went down to 50 percent.

...this election appears, based on everything that we know right now, to have been a tremendous and even surprising success, particularly if the turnout to be **as high as 60 percent**, despite the participation or lack of it by the Sunnis.... 8 million Iraqis went to the polls, about 60 percent of the electorate. That turnout, in some areas as high as 95 percent. The mood in Baghdad tonight has been described as exuberant. (CNN, 30 Jan, 6 PM EST)

From 60 percent to 50 percent.

Iraqi officials **hope for a turnout of at least 50 per cent** to lend legitimacy to the outcome. Even if turnout is lower, the election is expected to receive the international stamp of approval. (Australian 31 Jan)

If the turnout is finally reckoned to be 50 per cent, or anything like it, and the deaths attributable to the insurgency are less than a total bloodbath, that will be considered a step forward. ...

Early reports from polling stations show that the turnout in Iraq's election yesterday **could reach or exceed 50 per cent**, political party officials said.

"The reports we are receiving indicate that the turnout **will hit more than 50 per cent**. Iraqis are looking at these elections as an issue of dignity," Hafedh said. (China Daily 31 Jan)

Now the word is that a 30 per cent overall turnout would be satisfactory (New Statesman, 31 Jan)

On the day following the election (Jan 31st), one of the senior IECI official, who had earlier pointed to a 72 percent turnout, confirmed that they had as yet not counted the number of people who had voted. In other words, the earlier figures on voter turnout, which were used in the news reports, were not based on a precise tally of the vote:

"Counting is going smoothly, from what I have heard from centers around the country, it is going very well," Farid Ayar, a spokesman for the Electoral Commission, said. "When we have complete figures on the number of people who voted in different centers, we will announce them," he said. (Al Jazeera, 31 Jan 2005)

Reports which contradict the Western media consensus, that "the turnout was high"

1. Cancelled Elections and Low Turn Out

In five out of 18 governates, according to a Russian parliamentary observer, the elections were either cancelled due to the lack of security or were marked by a very low turnout. (Novosti, 30 Jan). This statement contradicts the figures presented by the IECI at the Press Conference, which indicate voter turnout of 50 per cent or more in all the governates. (including Sunni regions where there was a boycott, as confirmed by several press reports). (See Table 1 below)

2. The Boycott was not limited to the Sunni Triangle

The boycott of the elections was not limited to the Sunni areas as conveyed by the Western media. According to Muhammad Ayyash al-Kubaysi, of the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), in an Al-Jazeera interview (31 Jan 2005), the boycott was heeded in a number of “dominantly” Shiite areas. It is worth noting the position of Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr, whose supporters “have stopped short of calling for a boycott but insist they are not supporting the election.”

According to Xinhua (in a report issued 5 hours before the close of polling stations):

“The turnout was very low during the past few hours in Tikrit, Dujail, Balad and Tuz, much lower than expected,” a source in the electoral body told Xinhua. “In addition, no voters showed up in Baiji, Samarra and Dour,” said the source, who declined to be identified. The cities of Dujail and Balad have mixed population of Shiites and Sunnis, while Tuz has a mosaic of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen. In Tikrit, some 170 km north of Baghdad, 75 percent of the voting stations have not been visited till now. (Xinhua, 30 Jan 2005, 9 AM GMT)

3. Several cities in Iraq did not receive Electoral Materials

“In the city of Mosul, the deputy governor said that four towns did not receive the election process materials. How do you justify this? These towns are Bashqa, Bartillah, Al-Hamdaniyah and Jihan. They did not receive the material for the election process.” (Iraqi Al-Sharqiyah TV, 30 Jan)

4. The Election was used to Promote the Creation of a Separate State in Kurdistan

In a number of polling stations in Kurdistan, the ballot included a referendum on the creation of a separate Kurdish state. this was barely mentioned in news reports:

Outside most polling stations, members of a movement demanded the creation of an independent Kurdish state” (The Independent, 31 Jan 2005)

Many northern polling stations also held an unofficial referendum on independence, asking voters in favor to check a box next to a

Kurdish flag, and those against to check an Iraqi flag” (Boston Globe, 31 Jan 2005)

5. Sanctions against those who do Not Vote: No Vote, No Ration Card, No Food

The election commission had estimated that 14 million people are eligible to vote, based on the number who received ration coupons through the UN Oil for Food program. In this regard, the international observer mission had recommended. “using the rolls for Iraq’s food rationing system as a sort of makeshift census to guide the effort.” (NYT 31 Jan 2005).

In the weeks leading up to the election, there were reports that food rations would be cancelled if voters did not show up at the polls. In Fallouja, polling stations were set up “at centers that distribute food, water and cash payments to residents whose homes were devastated by the offensive” (LA Times, 31 Jan 2005).

According to Al-Basa’ir, weekly, of the Muslim Scholars Council in its pre-election Jan 19th issue:

.. those who do not take part in the forthcoming elections will be punished.... “sanctions will be taken against those who refuse to vote or go to the polling stations.” The article goes on to say: “The Iraqis have become accustomed at the end of each year, specifically in the last month of the year, to replace their ration cards with new ones to cover the months of the new year. However, one notices that December this year has passed without the Iraqis reading in the local papers or hearing in audiovisual media any mention of any invitation calling on them to replace these cards. This gave rise to many rumours as to why the issuance of these cards was delayed. The only plausible reason they found for this is that “the government intends to withhold these cards from the families that will not participate in the elections. Many Iraqis affirm that the new ration card has been printed and that it will be distributed to the head of the family while he votes and that those who do not go to the polling stations will not get their cards, and therefore will not receive the staples that are covered by the card as a punishment.” (BBC Monitoring 24 Jan 2005)

5. Voter participation in the overseas ballot was low

According to Xinhua (31 Jan), some 25 percent of those eligible to vote outside Iraq had registered to take part in the historic poll. And of those who had registered in 14 foreign countries, the turnout was placed at 60 percent, namely 15 percent of eligible Iraqi voters of the Diaspora.

Table 1: Breakdown of Voter Turnout according to IECI official : 2 hours before closing of voting booths

At the start of the live relay, Al-Lami listed the voter turnout in each governorate as follows: “70 per cent in Al-Sulaymaniyah Governorate (northeastern Iraq), 60 per cent in Salah-al-Din Governorate (north of Baghdad), 60 per cent in Al-Ta’mim Governorate (northern Iraq), 82 per cent in Duhok Governorate (far northern Iraq), 65 per cent in Baghdad Al-Rusafah, 95

per cent in Baghdad Al-Karkh, 90 per cent in Karbala (southeast of Baghdad), 50 per cent in Diyala (Governorate, northeast of Baghdad), 66 per cent in Babil (Governorate, south of Baghdad), 75 per cent in Wasit (Governorate, southeast of Baghdad), 66 per cent in Basra (Governorate, southeastern Iraq), 80 per cent in Dhi-Qar (Governorate, southeastern Iraq), 92 per cent in Maysan (Governorate on Iranian border, southern Iraq), 80 per cent in Al-Muthanna (Governorate, in southern Iraq), 50 per cent in Al-Qadisiyah (Governorate, to south of Baghdad), and 80 per cent in Al-Najaf (Governorate, southern Iraq). Vote turnout in Al-Anbar (western Iraq) and Salah-al-Din governorates is a big surprise; it will be announced in the coming news conference (as heard), God willing. The number of polling centres opened is 5171 in all of Iraq's governorates."

Source IECI Press Conference, Al-Iraqiyah TV, Baghdad, in Arabic 1224 gmt 30 Jan 05

ANNEX

January 30, 2005

IRAQI ELECTORAL COMMISSION SPOKESMAN QUIZZED ON TURNOUT FIGURES, VOTE COUNT

Text of satellite interview with Farid Ayyar, official spokesman of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, in Baghdad, by Iman Sadiq, broadcast live by Iraqi Al-Sharqiyah TV on 30 January

(Sadiq) First of all, we welcome you. We are happy to have you with us in your capacity as a fellow journalist. You and your staff have performed very well in the Iraqi elections. This is a national effort, for which you should be thanked. This was not really expected. Secondly, we welcome you as the official spokesman of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI).

(Ayyar) Thank you very much and you are welcome.

(Sadiq) We have several questions to put to you, since you are the official spokesman of the IECI. But we want you to answer in your capacity as a fellow journalist as well. First of all, Al-Sharqiyah has received many complaints. Two hours before the polls closed, there was a news conference. You explained that the voter turnout had reached 72 per cent and in some areas 90 per cent. After the polls were closed and at a news conference, you told those present that the expected voter turnout was 60 per cent. Why this contradiction, although there was only a difference of two hours between the two statements?

(Ayyar) Thank you very much for your introduction, which was realistic, because the success of these elections does not concern a certain category or group. Rather, it concerns all Iraqis, including those who did not take part in the elections. Iraq is for all and the elections are for all. Therefore, responsibility should also be assumed by all.

(Sadiq) Dr Farid, why this contradiction?

(Ayyar) I will answer you. First of all, about the question that has to do with announcing a certain turnout; well, the percentage that was announced in the afternoon was an estimate

and it depended on the flow of people in front of polling centres and not on official statistics produced by counting the ballots.

(Sadiq) On what did the percentages that were announced at the news conference depend? Were they based on the flow of people only?

(Ayyar) Yes, on the basis of the flow of people and the expectations in front of the polling centres at many places throughout Iraq and also some contacts with the presiding officers of these centres, whether in the north, the south or the centre. The person who announced these figures did not say that they were final figures. So far, we have no results for the elections. The counting is taking place right now. I heard that Al-Sharqiyah knows some things, which we do not know.

(Sadiq) In the city of Mosul, the deputy governor said that four towns did not receive the election process materials. How do you justify this? These towns are Bashqa, Bartillah, Al-Hamdaniyah and Jihan. They did not receive the material for the election process. Why is this?

(Ayyar) The deputy governor is not authorized to make a statement on behalf of the IECI, which is impartial. He does not have the right to speak in our name. I am the official spokesman and I can speak about everything related to the IECI and the elections.

(Sadiq) He did not speak in the name of the IECI. He only said that some areas did not receive the election process materials. What is your justification, since you represent the IECI, which is in charge of the elections?

(Ayyar) This did not happen. We have distributed all the supplies, forms and ballot boxes based on a tight plan to all areas. I do not know how he said this. We are certain that our work was good, although there is a possibility of human error. Anyone might make a mistake. However, this did not happen.

(Sadiq) The IECI exerted tremendous efforts and you deserve to be thanked for that. It was a huge effort that nobody expected and nobody denies this. However, ballot counting has started using lamps. Does this negatively affect the results or the ballot counting?

(Ayyar) I would like to say that among the things that were imported to provide polling stations with is these special lamps. These lamps were brought so as to have enough light, in case a power outage takes place, in order to enable those involved in the ballot counting to do their job. This is part of the things we purchased to supply the needs of polling stations in Iraq. Therefore, lamps are available and the ballot counting is currently under way. We will announce results once we have them.

(Sadiq) If the IECI is the only party concerned with this issue, what is the reason for the delay in announcing the results? Two weeks or 10 days are too much. Everybody is waiting eagerly for the results of the elections. Seventy per cent of ballot counting was completed a few hours after closing ballot boxes. Why then is this delay if the IECI is the only party concerned with this issue?

(Ayyar) Thanks for telling me that 70 per cent of ballot counting was completed despite the fact that I, the spokesman for the IECI, do not know this per cent until now! There is no delay. The official and final results will be announced after receiving the results of the out-of-country voting, which will continue for four days according to the International

Organization for Migration (IOM). Afterward, these results will be collected together with local results here and will be announced to the public in an official ceremony. We want to finish this matter as soon as possible. There is nothing hidden (changes thought) - but we will finish the job and announce results most probably in less than 10 days, or even in seven or six days. We will finish our work and announce results in an honest and transparent manner.

(Sadiq) Then you will not give us a specific date for announcing the final or the initial results.

(Ayyar) The initial results will be announced as soon as the IECI receives them. They will be announced day by day during pre-planned news conferences. If any results become available to us by tomorrow, we will definitely announce them. After ballot counting, every polling centre will announce its results. Afterward, these results will be sent to the main centre -

(Sadiq, interrupting) We received many results from Kirkuk, Huwayjah, Mosul and Basra governorates. Results have started to appear and they are being sent to Al-Sharqiyah TV, but we do not want to announce them so as not to cause chaos or discrepancy in figures. We will wait for the IECI's results. We thank you for the tremendous efforts you exerted and we are happy that you are a fellow journalist. Thank you very much.

Source: Al-Sharqiyah, Baghdad, in Arabic 1837 gmt 30 Jan 05. BBC Monitoring, **Copyright 2005 Financial Times Information**

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