

# Ads with Ambition: An Examination of Voter Recruitment by Iraqis and Non-Iraqis in Iraq

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*The author examines visual and rhetorical strategies used by Iraqi and non-Iraqi groups in recruiting voters for the January 2005 legislative and presidential elections. Case studies include the USAID, various Shiite clergy groups, and Future Iraq Assembly, which is a non-governmental organization of activists, businesspeople, and academicians. Religious appeals used by Iraqi clergy and interest groups are contrasted to nationalistic appeals used by the United States government. The author asserts that while religious rhetoric was most effective at prompting Iraqis to vote, it did not foster long-term understanding of the democratic process, and in fact heightened sectarian tensions, possibly having a destabilizing effect on the future of Iraq.*

Imagine that you have been sent to Iraq to work on a voter recruitment campaign for the January 2005 legislative elections. According to a CNN news report, “With less than two weeks before the vote, U.S. officials admit that the insurgents have succeeded in discouraging Sunni participation by assassinating election workers, gunning down politicians and threatening with death anyone who shows up to vote.” Many Iraqis, especially Sunnis, do not trust you because you are an outsider. How are you going to convince them to go to the polls?

This challenge faced both Iraqi and international organizations working on the elections in Iraq. To examine these efforts, I will first briefly consider the political and ethnic context and why voter recruitment for this particular election was so challenging. Then, I will contrast the rhetoric used by Iraqi and non-Iraqi groups in voter recruitment ads, showing how groups from abroad appealed primarily to Iraqi

nationalism and unity, while Iraqi groups largely relied on religious and ethnic symbolism. Future Iraq Assembly provided a “middle ground” alternative to these two approaches, because it used nationalistic ads but integrated Iraqi traditions. After describing these strategies, I will evaluate their efficacy. I argue that religious rhetoric was the most effective at recruiting voters. The significance of the widespread use of religious rhetoric was that many Iraqi voters were uninformed about the candidates’ positions and political qualifications and had only a vague understanding of the practical value of the elections. The broader implication of the apparent success of religious rhetoric was the widening of ethnic and religious divisions, which could further destabilize Iraq in the future.

In order to assess the different voter recruitment approaches in Iraq, we must consider the ethnic and religious struggles that have been part of Iraqi society for decades. Saddam Hussein seized control of

Iraq in 1968, and his Baath Party consisted mainly of minority Sunni Arabs. Human rights abuses were perpetrated against Shiites, the ethnic group that makes up a majority of Iraq’s population, and Kurds, a minority group accused of harboring separatist intentions, throughout Hussein’s rule. In the 1990s the situation deteriorated even more for two principal reasons: first, United Nations economic sanctions made access to education and health care more difficult, and second, in order to consolidate his power, Hussein collaborated with Islamic tribal traditions. Reliance on tribal sheiks in rural areas was detrimental to human rights; it gave a substantial role in government to a conservative interpretation of Islamic law. This included a diminished role for women in society as well as fewer civil liberties for all Iraqis, which before the transition had been slightly more liberal than most Middle Eastern countries.

From Iraq’s history, it is evident that

not only is the country strongly Islamic, but it is also sectarian, because ethnic and religious divisions were institutionally reinforced by the Saddam Hussein regime. As an article from *The New York Times* explains, “The volatile sectarian mix is a holdover from the rule of Saddam Hussein, who gave favors to Sunni Arab landowners in the lush farmland around Baghdad to reinforce loyalties and to protect against Shiites in the south.” In terms of voter recruitment, this means that Iraqis are especially responsive to the rhetoric of their religious and ethnic groups. As Gareth Stansfield, a lecturer at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, asserts, “The empowerment of groups associated with a communal identity is currently the norm within Iraq.” Thus, Iraqi ethnic and cultural ties are often stronger than nationalist sentiments.

Because of the presence of ethnic and religious partitions, the January 2005 elections in Iraq presented a significant challenge for organizations working to recruit voters. One consequence of sectarian tensions was a volatile security situation. The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars held an election briefing with Iraqis on December 22, 2005 talking with Iraqis who “expressed concern about the current wave of violence against anyone working with the interim government, UN, coalition forces, or Iraqi military forces.” In addition, ethnic clashes meant that different Iraqis had different perspectives on the election; no single strategy could be applied to all ethnic and religious groups. One reporter from *The Washington Post* found that “[the] pre-election season has laid bare the sectarian fault lines that pit...religious Shiites—who are eager for power commensurate with their numbers—against Sunnis suspicious of both U.S. intentions and Shiite ambitions.” Shiites and Kurds, as the majority in Iraq, were largely supportive of the electoral process, while Sunnis opposed the elections because they feared that the new government would marginalize them. Many worried that Sunnis would boycott the elections, rendering the results illegitimate. This would essentially exclude

Sunnis from the electoral process, damaging the legitimacy and effectiveness of any new government. In the long-term view, political participation is a crucial step on the road to a democratic state. According to Glen Rangwala, a scholar at Cambridge University, “Open electoral contest will inevitably bring with it the possibility of a considerable realignment of political forces along national lines.” Voter turnout was also a pragmatic concern for both the United States military and Iraqis themselves; as one Sunni politician said, “It is a big message to the insurgents that people wanted to go forward with the political process.”

Given the disjointed nature of Iraqi society, it is no surprise that religious and ethnic rhetoric were effective techniques in voter recruitment. But because the United States government envisioned Iraq as a unified, secular democracy, it did not use appeals to Islam or ethnic groups to engage voters. One flyer distributed in rural Iraq by the US Army Civil Affairs division shows the Iraqi flag in the shape of Iraq, with hands reaching to put ballots in a ballot box in the background. (Figure 1) The way the hands are striving to reach the ballot box presents voting as a desirable and popular act. This image also says to Iraqis that because their compatriots are voting, they should too. Nationalism is the predominant appeal; the flyer has no faces, making it impossible to distinguish ethnic groups among the people pictured. The flyer does not address religion at all, which distinguishes it from appeals to religion and ethnicity used by Iraqi groups. The influence of media coverage on this process can also be seen; the fact that the photographer chose to use an older woman in his image emphasizes a new role for women in the political process, something rarely broached in strategies of religious rhetoric. Because the woman is in traditional dress and is from a rural area, it might also be expressing the universality of the elections.

Another American advertisement created by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) shows a girl in a school uniform putting a ballot



Figure 1: US Army poster (Reuters)

into a ballot box. (Figure 2) The imagery of the child evokes a simplistic and wholesome view of elections, and perhaps aims to dispel the idea that democracy represents Western hegemony. This feeling of innocence is heightened by the fact that the ad is a cartoon, and the female child suggests the intention to give women a larger role in society. The girl's clothing is not necessarily Western, but she does not have a veil or chador and the bottoms of her legs are showing, taboos in a strict interpretation of Islam. This could imply a rejection of the repression of Iraqi women

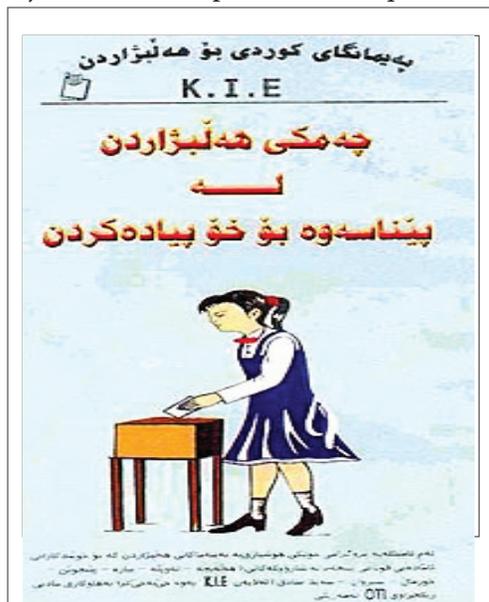


Figure 2: USAID poster (www.usaid.gov)

under the Saddam Hussein after his ties to tribal sheiks strengthened. The United States aimed to build a secular democracy in Iraq, and this can be seen in its refusal to use religious or ethnic rhetoric to recruit voters. This aspect of US strategy differentiates it from that of Iraqi groups. Iraqi civil society groups, because they better understood how to reach potential voters, took advantage of existing divisions in their efforts to promote the elections. Through religious and ethnic appeals, Iraqi groups appear to have successfully reached their targeted portions of the Iraqi population. The Iraqi group most instrumental in the electoral process was Shiite clergy. Sami Shamousi, a Shiite prayer leader from Baghdad, said, "The clergy are advocating elections 100 percent...It has become a religious responsibility for us to encourage participation in the elections." The clergy's sense of duty undoubtedly came from religious edicts issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most prominent and influential Shiite. Maher Hamra, a Shiite sheik whose office works under Sistani's name, helped to organize educational workshops and lectures about the elections for Iraqis. Hamra's office also sent clergymen to various high schools in order to encourage young people to participate in the elections. Quotations from Sistani, including, "One vote is like gold, but even more precious," could be seen on posters hung in many Shiite cities. Sistani was a pivotal figure in the monumental task of organizing elections; his support of the elections caused a ripple effect on all levels of Shiism, and many clerics subsequently encouraged their congregations to vote. Voter recruitment messages from clergy demonstrated the prevalence of religious rhetoric.

On the surface, the role of Shiite clergy in the electoral process seems entirely positive; they used their power to advocate for political engagement. However, the tactics of referring to Ayatollah Sistani and appealing to Islam became tools of extremism. A poster put out by an unknown Iraqi group read, "If you don't consider it your religious duty, then your national duty calls on you to vote." The tone of this ad

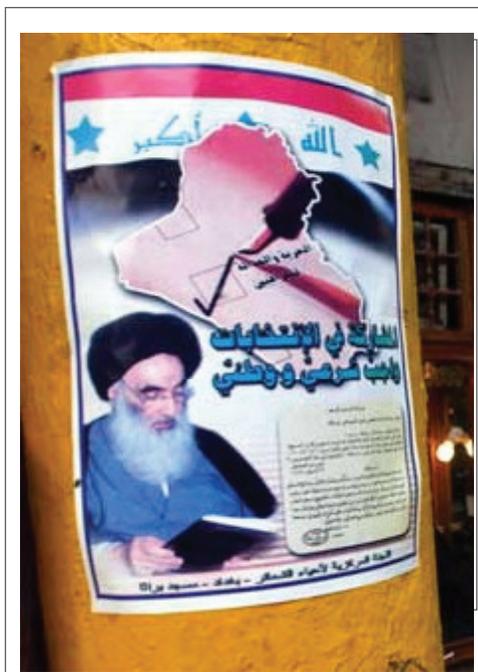


Figure 3: Poster with Sistani (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/pix/b/nea/iraq/39790.htm>)

is admonishing, and it seems to imply that voting should be considered a religious duty. Many Iraqis responded to religious pressure instead of considering personal reasons for voting. According to Nermeen al-Mufti from the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly*, "Some do not even know whether this election is to select a national council or a president." The images of Sistani, on the other hand, were hard to miss: "The campaign has become so pitched that many Iraqis may have a better idea of Sistani's view of the election than what the election itself will decide." Many Shiite groups plastered their cities with posters of Sistani's face (Figure 3) next to a brief message from him urging Iraqis to vote. Information about the elections and their importance to Iraq's future was strangely absent from these posters, and for a population unaccustomed to open elections this explanation was sorely needed. For many Shiites it did not appear to matter. One merchant from Baghdad said, "I'm going [to the voting station] because Al-Sayid Al-Sistani said that whoever doesn't vote is going to hell." The connection that the man draws between voting and the after-life shows the strong influence of religious appeals. It appears that Iraqis internal-

ized Sistani's endorsement of the process as evidence that as Shiites they must vote, regardless of personal investment in the political process. The combination of Sistani's countenance and the word "duty" in all likelihood was enough persuasion for many Iraqis because of the tremendous esteem in which Iraqi Shiites hold Sistani.

Other Iraqis might have been confused by nationalistic and religious appeals. One bemused Iraqi teacher commented, "The electoral commission didn't explain why we are having elections now, it just spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on posters and television adverts that said things like 'Vote for Iraq.'" This man's bewilderment demonstrates how abstract the idea of a unified Iraq was in the midst of sectarian tensions and ongoing violence. The Iraqi groups' religious rhetoric may have prevented some Iraqis from questioning the validity of the elections, but others, such as this teacher, felt unengaged by a process without a clearly articulated purpose.

Even more alarming than the frequent employment of religious appeals was the trend of symbolism seen in many campaigns. Party symbols came about because fear of insurgent reprisal prevented some candidates from publicizing their names, and because of the fledgling nature of voter education programs. The same merchant also commented, "There are too many names on the list that it becomes difficult to recognise them. It is easier to refer to those electoral lists by the symbols they choose." Some of the symbols chosen included the candle (Unified Iraqi Coalition, the party backed by Sistani), a mosque minaret (Independent Democrats Coalition), a hand wearing a wedding ring (Iraqi Communist Party), a rose, a bridge, and various others. The candle is especially interesting because it evokes hope and faith; its image may have implied to Iraqis that the Unified Iraqi Coalition would bring a brighter future to Iraq. Because of the widespread use of symbols without accompanying explanations, many Iraqis voted based on the symbols, some without even knowing the names of the candidates. This can be viewed as the simpli-



Figure 4: Unified Iraqi Coalition Posters (Ali Al-Saadi, Agence France-Presse)

fication of a complex electoral process for a populace unfamiliar with elections, or the exploitation of internal divisions. For example, as seen in the ad for the Unified Iraqi Coalition (Figure 4), using Sistani's face and the candle in the same poster can be very powerful. Sistani and the candle become irrevocably joined in the minds of Shiite Iraqis, and when they go to the polls they will be likely to choose the candle. The lack of political discourse in the election was worrisome; according to Motohiro Ono, an economist specializing in the Middle East, "This was an election without policy debate or political ideology. This has also simply put off matters until later, and these problems will have to be addressed in the near future." Religious rhetoric contributed to the lack of genuine engagement in controversial political and social issues. And by emphasizing symbolism rather than ideology in campaigns, sectarian tensions were actually being reinforced, since Iraqis were encouraged to vote based on a party's symbol rather than its principles. A declaration by the Muslim Scholars' Board, a Sunni group, that the government formed by the election was "illegitimate," foreshadowed heightened tensions. The condemnation was made because the new government had almost no Sunnis in it, owing to the widespread Sunni election boycott.

Between the sectarian appeals of Iraqi religious groups and the nationalist rhet-

oric of the United States, were there any other strategies? In the grey area between "outsiders" and "insiders" lies Future Iraq Assembly, whose origins are unclear. The group describes itself as "[an] independent, non-governmental organization, comprised of a number of scholars, businesspersons, and activists, who share a common and firm belief in freedom and progress for all the Iraqi people." This group is an example of how democracy can be presented with an Iraqi character without the use of religious rhetoric, a feat that neither the Americans nor the Iraqis accomplished. Some of its goals include, "Reinforce the unity of Iraq, land and people; Ensure freedom to the people, political parties, assemblies, and associations; Consolidate Iraqis' full and operative sovereignty over our land." The group has been linked to Ayatollah Sistani and his allies, although there are also suggestions that it consists of Iraqi expatriates. Future Iraq Assembly produced an extensive billboard campaign spanning more than a dozen major Iraqi cities, using the of a hand placing an Iraqi flag into a ballot box. The slogan reads, "In order to give our children a better future." (Figure 5) The prominence of the Iraqi flag suggests the

kind of national unity that Western groups tried to emphasize, but the use of the word "our" seems to be an appeal from Iraqis to other Iraqis. The skin color could be considered either Arab or Caucasian, and this ambiguity might be deliberate. The hand is clearly a man's; perhaps because of varying levels of adherence to Islamic law in Iraq, a woman's hand would be too controversial. From the small amount of clothing that can be seen, the man is wearing a Western business suit, which hints at modernization and secularism. The poster subtly combines elements of Iraqi and American voter recruitment tactics.

Future Iraq Assembly also produced television ads for the 2005 election that used individual testimonials from Iraqis with a variety of backgrounds. One collection of quotations from Iraqis focused on their aspirations for the future. A woman in a Western-style business suit says, "I hope to be an ambassador one day." (Figure 6) The fact that a woman is expressing her ambition to be involved in government represents a departure from traditional gender roles. Her business attire shows a progressive, modern view of women in society. The ad cuts from a shepherd to a craftsman in his work-



Figure 5: Future Iraq Assembly billboard ([www.futureiraq.org](http://www.futureiraq.org))



Figure 6: "I hope to be an ambassador one day" ([www.futureiraq.org](http://www.futureiraq.org))

room, to a woman wearing a headscarf, and finally to a little boy playing with a toy airplane and saying, "I want to be a pilot." The child might function similarly to the poster of the schoolgirl discussed earlier; the use of children gives the democratic process an innocent simplicity, while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of elections for Iraq's future generations. The final slogan in the ad is, "Your dream is within your reach." This emphasis on "you" and the consistent use of "I" statements suggest an individualistic approach reminiscent of the West, but references in the ad to more "traditional" ways of life show a strong Iraqi influence. The fact that one of the women is wearing a headscarf shows more cultural sensitivity than many Western ads. One of the most interesting aspects of the televised ads is that each has both a Kurdish and an Arabic version, which are identical except for the language. This indicates that Future Iraq Assembly did not alter its pitch for differ-

ent ethnic or religious groups. However, it did weave in elements of Iraqi culture and so did not appear to be speaking from an outsider perspective. It is an interesting case study of a voter recruitment strategy lying between the extremes of secular nationalistic and religious appeals. Future Iraq Assembly's approach could be a model for future elections, because it promotes the ideals of human rights without alienating Iraqis.

It is evident that the sense of Iraqi nationalism that the United States government hoped to generate did not become a reality during or after the elections. Iraqis seemed to go to, or stay away from, the polls because their local or national religious leaders told them (directly or indirectly) that it was their religious duty. Many Iraqis did not seem to comprehend the significance of the elections, either for the immediate or distant future of their country, and much of this was a result of the techniques that other Iraqis used to persuade them to vote. This brings up another question; namely, was the Iraqi approach justified? Was it more important that Iraqis went to the polls, or was it more important that they were informed and voted because of personal convictions? While simply getting Iraqis to the polls in higher numbers was a significant achievement, was it a legitimate reason to appeal to religion? It could be argued that the outcome of the elections would have been the same even if religious rhetoric had been absent from the campaign, because Iraqis would still have voted for the party that coincided with their religion or ethnicity.

However, appeals to religion and ethnicity reinforced the divisions that already existed in Iraqi society by emphasizing, and in some cases exaggerating, the differences between sects. As is apparent from the case of Ayatollah Sistani, religious rhetoric could have impeded the state building process. By upholding Sistani as the ultimate authority in Shiites' lives, the legitimacy of the new Iraqi government was diminished even before its inception.

Religious and ethnic appeals augmented the fractured nature of Iraqi society, and they did not help the democratic process. According to Francis Fukuyama's model of democratic development, "Democracy cannot be considered fully consolidated until it is rooted in the political culture of the society." By persuading civilians to participate in the electoral process using religious pressure, the culture of Iraq was not being altered to foster democratic growth; on the contrary, long-standing non-democratic institutions were reinforced. Without a sound understanding of the political process, the cultural aspect of Iraqi society could not truly be engaged in democracy.

So if you were sent to Iraq to recruit voters, which approach would you choose? Would you opt for a more effective strategy of using Iraqis' sense of identity within a community, or would you take a risk on "Western" nationalistic appeals? The answer to this question may prove to be essential for the survival of a democratic Iraq.

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Kara Johnson is a sophomore at Stanford University majoring in Political Science. She is a Minnesota native. She is particularly interested in the democratic process in Iraq because she was involved with community action groups there around the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This led her to various vigils, rallies, and marches, and exposed her to diverse perspectives about the war. A related research interest at Stanford is the role of the American media in shaping public opinion of the Iraq war. Other research interests have included the media and civil society in Sierra Leone and the role of women in Egyptian society.