Supporting Elections In The Age Of Misinformation And Disinformation

UNAMI OEA'S SUPPORT TO IHEC IN COMBATING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION DURING THE 2021 COR ELECTIONS.

United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance

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SECTION 1:

Executive Summary of the report

Social media has become an increasingly important part of the electoral process, as it provides a platform for electoral stakeholders like electoral management bodies (EMBs), politicians and political parties, civil society organizations (CSO) to reach out to voters and engage with them. It can be a useful tool for voters to stay informed about the issues and to connect with others.

However, social media has also been used to spread misinformation and disinformation during elections such as false or misleading information about EMBs, its leadership and other concerned national and international stakeholders like the United Nations and its management, candidates, their policies, or the electoral process itself.

In the Iraqi context, the threat of misinformation and disinformation has been particularly significant in recent years. Iraq has a young and rapidly growing population, with over half of its population under the age of 25. This demographic has been particularly susceptible to the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms, which have become an increasingly important source of news and information for many Iraqis.

Misinformation and disinformation can undermine public trust in elections and the electoral process, and can even influence the outcome of elections. As a result, it is important for EMBs to timely act to combat misinformation and disinformation in order to protect the integrity of elections with proper strategies.

This report highlights United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA) support to Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) in combating misinformation and disinformation in the context or 2021 Council of Representatives (CoR) elections.

This report aims to document the support of OEA to IHEC and provide insights that may be useful for other EMBs facing similar challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an increasingly important aspect of life in Iraq in recent years. With the widespread availability of internet access and the proliferation of smartphones, more and more Iraqis are turning to social media platforms as a means of communication and self-expression.

The number of internet users in Iraq has grown rapidly in recent years, reaching 30.52 million in 2021. This represents a significant increase from just 5.5 million users in 2012. The growth in internet access has been accompanied by an increase in the use of social media platforms. A recent study found that nearly 90% of internet users in Iraq use social media on a regular basis.

The youth population in Iraq is an important and dynamic part of the country's demographic landscape where currently nearly 60% of Iraq's population is under 25 years old, and the use of social media has played a crucial role in enabling young people to connect, share, and organize for various socio-economic causes. This is likely to continue to be the case as the youth population continues to grow and develop, and as social media continues to evolve and play an increasingly important role in Iraqi society.

Figure 1: Women voters queuing to vote on E-day

Figure 2: IHEC content against fraud and corruption

One notable trend in the use of social media in Iraq is the rise of online activism. For example, the widespread use of social media played a key role in the protests that swept Iraq in 2019, with many Iraqis using platforms like Twitter and Facebook to coordinate and share information about the demonstrations which led to change the electoral law and IHEC. Social media has provided a new platform and opportunity for all electoral stakeholders to directly reach out to the people and interact with them.

The misinformation and disinformation are significant concerns, particularly due to the country's large and rapidly growing youth population and complex political climate. This situation allows for the proliferation of false or misleading information, often spread by political actors or other groups and individuals seeking to gain an advantage in elections.

> **"**
> ..60% of Iraq's population is under 25 years old, and the use of social media has played a crucial role during 2021 CoR elections....
> **"**

UNAMI OEA's support to IHEC in combating misinformation and disinformation

> IHEC with the support of UNAMI OEA implemented a number of strategies to combat these threats including partnering with fact-checking organizations, educating the public about the importance of seeking out credible sources of information, and working with social media companies to identify and remove false or misleading information from their platforms.

In the past, the spread of false or misleading information has had a significant impact on the electoral process, attempting to undermine public trust in elections and potentially influencing the outcome of elections.

In response to the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation, IHEC with the support of UNAMI OEA implemented a number of strategies to combat these threats including partnering with fact-checking organizations, educating the public about the importance of seeking out credible sources of information, and working with social media companies to identify and remove false or misleading information from their platforms.

By implementing these strategies, IHEC helped to protect the integrity of elections and ensure that they are fair, transparent, and free from the influence of false or misleading information.

The purpose of this report is to document IHEC's efforts with UNAMI OEA's support to combat misinformation and disinformation during the 2021 CoR elections and assess their impact on the accuracy of information shared during the elections. The report also provides an overview of the nature and impact of misinformation and disinformation in elections, details the specific measures taken by IHEC to address these issues, present the results and impact of these efforts, and provide recommendations for future efforts.

Figure 3: IHEC Chairman along with OEA director Dr. Aamir A. Arain announcing the final results

Misinformation refers to false or misleading information that is spread unintentionally. It may be the result of a misunderstanding, error, or mistake. Although, many people are unaware that the information they are sharing is false, and this can have serious consequences.

It can take many forms, from deliberately false stories to genuine mistakes, and can have serious consequences, such as undermining trust in news media and democratic institutions and influencing public opinion and policies.

Disinformation refers to intentionally misleading or false information that is spread with the intention of manipulating or influencing public opinion. Disinformation is often used as a tactic in propaganda campaigns or in efforts to sway the electoral process, which can have serious consequences.

Figure 4: Statement by UN Secretary-General on disinformation.

Figure 5: Mobile applications developed during CoR 2021 elections by a CSO with UNAMI OEA's support.

Malinformation refers to information that is true, but is spread with the intention of causing harm or manipulating public opinion. This could include sensitive or personal information that is released without consent, or information that is taken out of context in order to create a negative impression. Malicious actors may use malinformation to spread false stories about candidates or the electoral process itself, with the aim of deceiving and manipulating voters. There has been a spread of mal-information, particularly following the announcements of results targeting the leadership of IHEC and UNAMI OEA.

An infodemic is a situation in which there is an overwhelming amount of information, both true and false, being circulated making it difficult for people to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information, and can lead to confusion and mistrust towards the electoral process and the institutions. Infodemic could occur if there is a proliferation of false or misleading information being circulated about candidates or political issues, the voting procedures and requirements making it difficult for voters to make informed decisions.

> " There has been a spread of mal-information, particularly following the announcements of results targeting the leadership of IHEC and UNAMI OEA. "
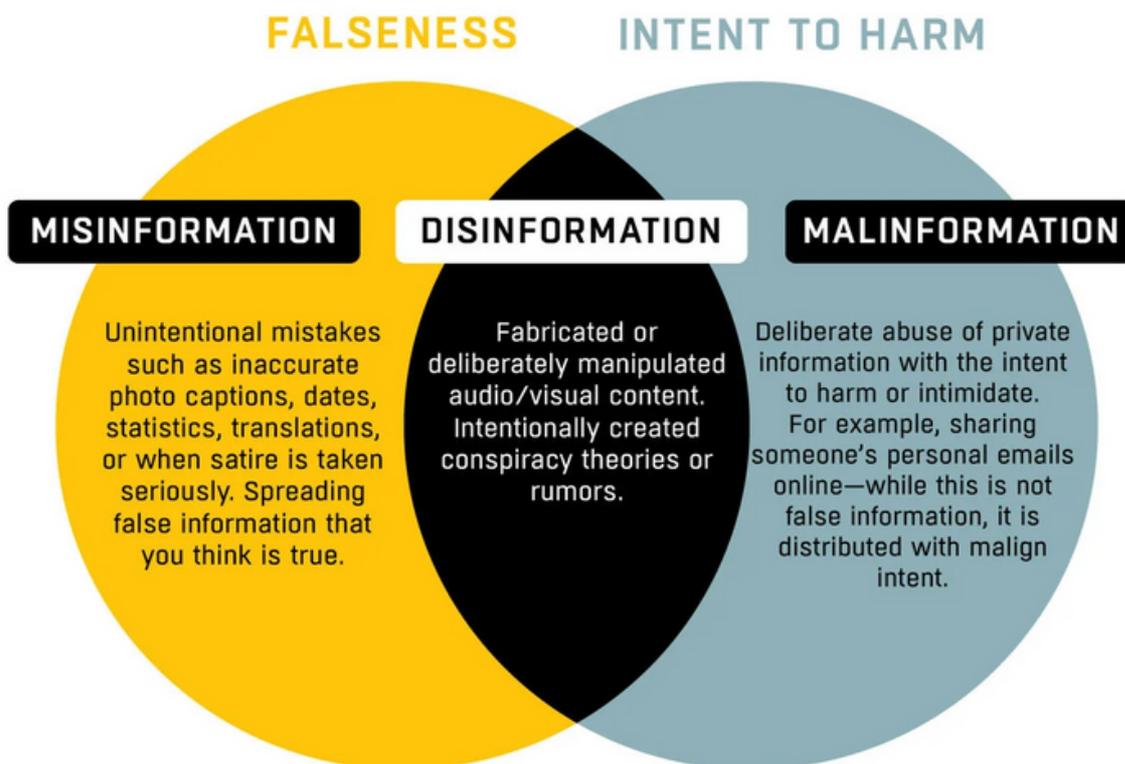
FALSENESS   INTENT TO HARM

MISINFORMATION	DISINFORMATION	MALINFORMATION
Unintentional mistakes such as inaccurate photo captions, dates, statistics, translations, or when satire is taken seriously. Spreading false information that you think is true.	Fabricated or deliberately manipulated audio/visual content. Intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumors.	Deliberate abuse of private information with the intent to harm or intimidate. For example, sharing someone's personal emails online—while this is not false information, it is distributed with malign intent.

Figure 6: Differentiating between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

SECTION 3:

Misinformation and CoR 2021 elections:

Elections in Iraq have been plagued by misinformation in recent years, with thousands of false stories circulating in the media and on social media.

The spread of misinformation and disinformation on the Iraqi 2021 election was significant, according to a news report there were more than 1,800 instances of misleading news reported in October 2021 alone. IHEC faced numerous attempts to sabotage its reputation during the 2021 Council of Representatives (CoR) elections. Some of these attempts were part of organized disinformation campaigns that aimed to undermine the integrity of the electoral process.

One of the key ways that these attacks sought to sabotage the IHEC's reputation was by spreading false or misleading information about the electoral process and the IHEC's role in it.
This included spreading rumors about voting devices and software security, it also included spreading false claims about results transmission from the polling station to IHEC servers and many falsely claimed that IHEC data had been breached and changed. These attacks sought to create confusion and mistrust among the public, in most of the cases IHEC countereed those misinformation with the advisory and technical support from UNAMI OEA.

Following are some generic examples of misinformation and disinformation that was observed during the 2021 CoR elections:-

1. False or misleading information about candidates: false or exaggerated claims about a candidate's record, qualifications, or stance on issues.
2. Misleading campaign ads or materials: online or offline ads or materials that use misleading or manipulated images or videos, or that make false or exaggerated claims about a candidate or their opponent.
3. Fake news or conspiracy theories: spread of false or misleading information through social media or other channels, often with the intention of influencing public opinion or undermining the credibility of candidates or political parties.

4. Voter suppression tactics: efforts to prevent or discourage certain groups of people from voting, such as through the spread of false or misleading information about the voting process or eligibility requirements.
5. Attempts to tamper with voting systems or results: efforts to discredit the elections results by publishing false and misleading contents about the vote counting and election results from different actors.
6. Attacks on election management bodies (EMBs) or other election-related organizations: False or misleading claims about the integrity or impartiality of IHEC, often with the intention of undermining public trust and confidence in the electoral process and the institution.
7. Targeted attacks against IHEC leadership especially after the announcements of results
8. Targeted attacks against United Nations Mission and OEA leadership: false or misleading claims about the role or activities of UN election assistance missions and leaderships using the language of hate-speech.
9. Different forms of hate speech against IHEC and UNAMI leadership.

UNAMI ✔ @UNIraq · 1m

إن تغلبت المعلومات المضللة على الواقع، فقد نواجه بسرعة تصورات خطيرة وزائفة ولكنها مقبولة. وبالتالي، دعوني أؤكد: بناء على طلب العراق، فإن الأمم المتحدة تشارك بشكل كامل في مساعدة السلطات في تنظيم انتخابات تتسم بالمصداقية والشفافية في تشرين الأول/ أكتوبر.

Jeanine Hennis ✔ @JeanineHennis · 39m

If misinformation overtakes reality, we may rapidly face dangerous and false, but accepted perceptions. Hence, let me emphasize: at Iraq's request, the UN is fully engaged to assist the authorities in organizing credible and transparent October elections.

Figure 7: SRSG Jeanine's post on twitter against misinformation in the context of election

Figure 8: IHEC explainer content against misinfomation during manual counting and sorting process.

In response to the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation, IHEC with the support of UNAMI OEA implemented a number of strategies to combat these threats. These strategies included educating the public about the importance of seeking out credible sources of information, conducting fact-check and explainers campaigns partnering with fact-checking organizations, working with social media companies to identify and remove false or misleading information from their platforms.

OEA identified some gaps in IHEC's social media engagement strategy, particularly the lack of a comprehensive framework for developing messages, creating content, and publishing on social media. UNAMI OEA provided support to the digital media office in developing a range of relevant plans, guidelines, concept notes, and documents. These resources helped IHEC to shape the overall activities of the digital media office, and assisted in conducting activities, developing content, and engaging with the public in a systematic and organized way.

The following is a list of the plans developed with the support of the OEA for the digital media.

Web and social media improvement matrix
- Review of IHEC social media activities and suggestions to improve it

Website and mobile application update plan
- Review of IHEC website (layout and content) and suggestions on updating IHEC website and mobile apps. The plan was further developed itno a web and digital strategy

Social media guidelines including dos and donts for IHEC employees
- A comprehensive social media guidelines document was developed that includes a plan to combat misinformation.

Digital and social media engagement activities
- Digital media engagement plan to launch crowd sourcing campaigns like #Ivote

Social media promotion/boosting plan
- A social media promotional to boost the post considering various target groups

E-day period content plan
- A comphrensive content development and publishing plan (7 - 12 October)

Post E-day content plan
- Content development and publication plan starting from October 12th onwards to announcements of final result

Post Final results infographic plan
- Plan for infographic content after final results

Figure 9: List of documents produced by UNAMI OEA to support IHEC on digital and social media.
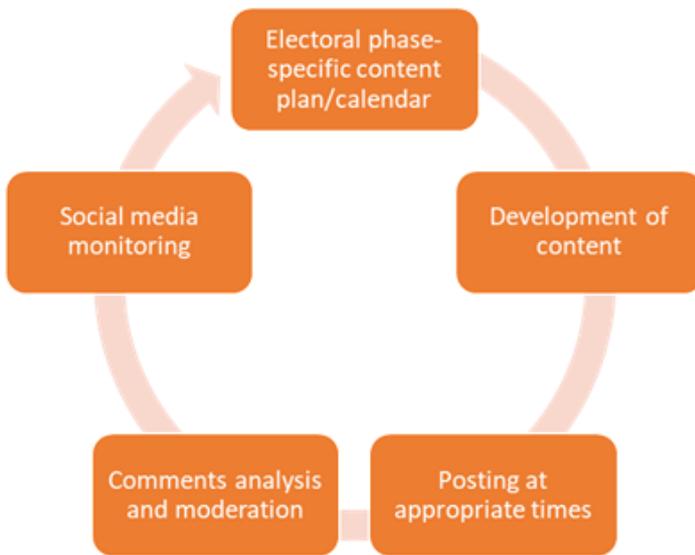
Figure 10: IHEC social media activities as suggested by UNAMI OEA

With the technical and advisory support of UNAMI, IHEC launched new digital engagement initiatives to promote two-way communication with the public through online platforms. These efforts not only allowed IHEC to publish content, but also enabled to actively listen to and engage with the people. The resulting interaction helped to better understand the concerns, questions, and needs of the audience, and allowed IHEC to create more relevant and appropriate content in response.

Following UNAMI OEA's proposal, IHEC launched the #Ivote campaign prior to the elections, asking people to share their photo with their biometric card and provide a good reason to vote, which could motivate others. IHEC received hundreds of photos and quotes from people, which were shared on social media and contributed to the organic growth of IHEC's reach.This initiative helped IHEC counter the anti-election and boycott campaign with the perspectives and voices of general Iraqis.

On election day, IHEC changed its campaign from #Ivote to #Ivoted and asked people to share photos of their ink-marked fingers after voting. This campaign received very positive feedback from the public, with hundreds of people sharing their photos. These photos were then published on IHEC's social media. After the election day, the #Ivoted campaign was changed to #your_vote_is_our_responsibility, assuring the public that their vote was safe and the process after voting would be handled equally carefully.

Figure 11: #I_vote campaign launched by IHEC with OEA's support

- **Fact-checking initiative:** with OEA's support, IHEC launched a proactive social media campaign to combat the spread of misinformation, fake news, and false rumors. IHEC developed Factcheck posts and content, which was shared through IHEC official social media platforms. IHEC monitored the social media to understand the rumous, which was later created as a Fact-check content.

Figure 12: Sample fact-check content produced by IHEC with OEA's support

Over the course of the initiative, more than 50 digital fact-checking posts were created and shared (English, Arabic, and Kurdish). The efforts were well-received by civil society organizations and social media influencers, and several popular community pages in Iraq also shared the fact-checking posts. OEA supported IHEC to reach out to engage with community pages such as "Tech for Peace," which helped to ensure a wider reach for IHEC's Fact-checking content.

- With UNAMI's inputs IHEC created and shared more than 15 social media posts addressing various electoral issues. The hashtag "#IHEC explains" was used in many of these posts to provide clarity on specific issues, and debunking rumors. Through these efforts, IHEC sought to educate the public on critical and technical electoral matters and promote transparent and fair elections.

Figure 13: IHEC sample content against the spread of misinformation and disinformaiton

- **Live question and answer:** IHEC conducted a live Facebook Q&A to help people understand electoral issues. Over 500,000 people participated in these interactive sessions, asking questions to thematic experts on topics such as E-day procedures, filing complaints, special voting, female quotas, and campaigning. This also helped IHEC to create relevant content based on people's questions and feedback.

- **Comments monitoring and moderation:** OEA advised and supported IHEC in monitoring the response and comments on IHEC's digital media, which helped them understand the perceptions and concerns of the public and clarify the rumors. OEA provided orientation and on-the-job training to IHEC in moderation and response, and IHEC recruited two additional staff members to moderate comments and respond to queries.

- With OEA's inputs IHEC introduced a "words filtering system" on IHEC social media, especially on Facebook preventing people from posting words related to hate speech, vulgar comments and promoting violence. The comments on IHEC social media platforms especially Facebook with the elements of hate speech, inflammatory and inappropriate words were auto deleted to keep IHEC social media posts clean. Hundreds of inappropriate and vulgar comments against candidates (including women candidates and leaders) were auto deleted. The comments on IHEC social media pages with such words were automatically hidden. On average 20-30% of comments that used "such words" were filtered and hidden by the IHEC social media pages.

Figure 14: IHEC holding live question and answer

Figure 15: Announcement on live question and answer on Facebook

Figure 16: IHEC fact-check content on final results

- **Regular Interactions with Meta/Facebook:** With the support of OEA and the Commission for Media and Communication (CMC), IHEC established a productive working relationship with major social media companies such as META/Facebook. This relationship included regular meetings with Facebook's regional office for the MENA region, during which technical and policy guidance and support were provided. These meetings also addressed related to potential misuse of platforms during the electoral period. This collaboration was useful in taking down posts that spread fake news and violated electoral laws, and Facebook often responded to IHEC's requests to remove inaccurate profiles and posts.

Collaboration with Civil Society: UNAMI OEA, through UNDP's "Support to Iraq's Electoral Process" Project, provided Low Value Grants to 31 CSOs to support voter education and awareness activities. From June 23, 2021 to October 9, 2021, these CSOs implemented a total of 47 projects across the country. CSOs conducted various awareness activities using digital and social media.

Figure 18: IHEC content encouraging people subscribe to IHEC's official information

- **Cybersecurity measures:** Elections in the digital age are vulnerable to hacking and other forms of electoral interference. UNAMI provided assistance to the IHEC in safeguarding social media data and protecting against cyber-attacks. On a couple of occasions, the hacked social media channels (YouTube) were recovered with UNAMI's direct communications with YouTube's help desk.

- With OEA's input, IHEC launched several campaigns such as "Your Question: Our Answer" to address the most frequently asked questions on its social media. These campaigns were effective in clarifying confusion and dispelling misinformation among voters.

Figure19: IHEC social media content for "Your question: our answer"

Gallery: content published by IHEC, with the support of UNAMI OEA, aimed to combat misinformation and disinformation

Some misinformation and disinformation cases observed during 2021 CoR elections:

- A video clip circulated on social media claiming to show voter intimidation in Tarmiyah. However, it was later discovered to be old footage of the assassination of lawyer Tariq Hilal Al-Dulaimi in June 2020. It is unclear who carried out the assassination.

- A video circulated on social media claiming to show fair elections in Iraq. However, it was later discovered to be old footage from the 2018 parliamentary elections. There have been no announcements of recorded fraud in the current elections. The Iraqi Ministry of Interior has clarified the truth and date of the video, and the Independent High Electoral Commission has called on the media to be careful and not to publish videos that do not belong to the current elections.

- News circulated on social media claiming that candidate Mohammed Al-Darraji was excluded from Iraq's parliamentary elections for buying voter cards. However, this news was denied by the spokeswoman of the High Electoral Commission, and the candidate himself also denied the news. The news was shared using the template of the al-Iraqia channel, but no source of the publication was found on the channel's official website.

A Case Study
COUNTERING THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION & FAKE NEWS

2018 video goes viral on the eve of 2021 elections

On October 8th, after the special voting, a video from 2018 emerged on a random TikTok account and was then shared by a Facebook page called "Mother of Humanity" with over 255k followers. The video was also published by the Facebook page of Albazznews (fb.com/albazznews), which haas over 786k followers. Within a few hours, the video was viewed by over 473k people

IHEC's Response with UNAMI OEA's Support

1 **Flagging to Facebook**

IHEC immediately flagged both posts to the Facebook regional bureau and requested that the head of policy and government take them down to prevent the further spread of misinformation, as the ballot papers are from 2018. Facebook immediately replied and promised to take appropriate actions.

2 **Developed Factcheck**

Urged people not to subscribe to those rumors and to check IHEC for authentic information.

FAKE NEWS!

خلال الساعات المقبلة ستجدون الكثير من الاخبار المضللة
يرجى الاعتماد على المواقع الرسمية
للمفوضية العليا المستقلة للانتخابات
في اخذ المعلومات الحقيقية والموثوقة

3 **Factcheck Slideshow**

Created a slideshow video compiling all Factcheck content and published as a video.

4 **Educational Post**

Posted on social media explaining to people what they can do when they see fake news about the election being promoted (sponsored)

التعامل مع الاخبار المزيفة
ــ الخاصة بالانتخابات
تقديم ابلاغ على المنشور/الشخص
متابعة صفحاتنا لمعرفة الاخبار الموثوقة
ارسال رابط المنشورات المزيفة الينا

5 **IHEC engagement with CSO pages**

OEA supported IHEC in coordinating with the community Facebook page Tech4peace, which works on digital literacy issues and has over 1.17 million followers. Tech4peace posted a fact-check post and alerted people about the video, quoting IHEC's post on Facebook. Tech4peace also published news on its website.

6 **IHEC appeal for media**

IHEC published a explainer and appealed media not to share the old video again as it could confuse people and negatively affect the electoral process.

Figure 20: Infographic illustrating the steps taken by IHEC with UNAMI's support to combat disinformation

IHEC social media reach achieved with the support of UNAMI OEA

IHEC SOCIAL MEDIA REACH
With UNAMI OEA's support

August - October 2021

INDICATORS	AUG	OCT	GROWTH
No. Of content	65	313	+ 381.5%
Total Reach (All social media platforms)	857.9k	15.2 M	+ 471.4%
Post Appearances (Facebook)	N/A	21 M	N/A
Followers	481K	760K	+ 81.49%
Video Views	99 K minutes	4.7 M minutes	+ 4622%
Post Engagement	276K	6.5M	+ 2259%
Women Reach	9%	25%	+ 177.77%

Twitter
Followers 989 ▸ **9341** + 845%   Impressions 23.3K ▸ **1.11M** + 4155%

Instagram
Followers 9K ▸ **21K** + 133%   Accounts Reached 31K ▸ **2.1M** + 6674%

Telegram
5.1K ▸ **32.4K** + 561%

Viber
15.7K ▸ **86.4K** + 450%

UNAMI's process driven support to IHEC

Social media audit
Digital media engagement plan
Social media guidelines
Social media analysis and monitoring

Social media improvment plan
Website and mobile apps update plan
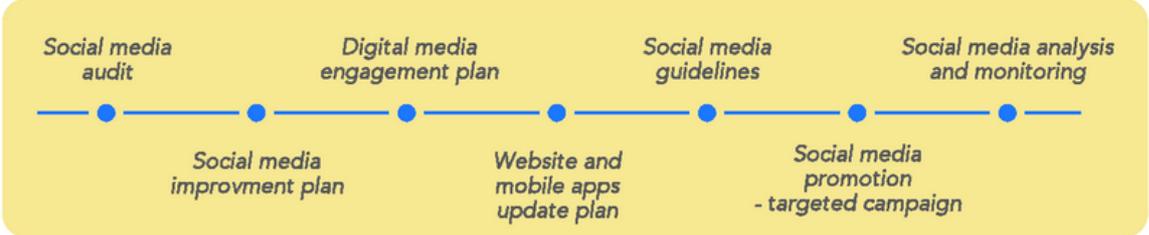Social media promotion - targeted campaign

Figure 21: IHEC social media reach achieved with the support of UNAMI OEA

SECTION 4:

Lessons learned exercise and capacity building activities

UNAMI and IHEC jointly conducted a lessons learned exercise to discuss IHEC's performance during the last elections, identify areas for improvement, and agree on technical and strategic recommendations and capacity development needs for the next electoral cycle.

UNAMI-IHEC teams discussed the recommendations and, based on these recommendations, OEA developed and submitted a web and digital strategy to IHEC. Additionally, in consultation with IHEC's public outreach directorate and digital media team, OEA identified key areas for capacity building on various aspects of social media, including combating misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech.

A half-day training session was conducted on a weekly basis for the staff of IHEC's public outreach office, specifically for the staff members of the digital media office and the electoral information unit. On average, 13 employees from both units participated in the training, including four females. Here're are the list of the training conducted by UNAMI OEA:

1. Basics of Cybersecurity: Cybersecurity and Various Aspects of Social Media.
2. Global and Iraqi Social Media Landscapes and Key Takeaways
3. Use of Social Media in an Electoral Context, and Best Practices with References to Social Media Activities of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) Across the World
4. Identifying Misinformation and Disinformation on Social Media in the Context of the Election.
5. Strategies to combat Misinformation and Disinformation in Iraq electoral context.
6. Social Listening and Social Media Monitoring in the Context of Elections.
7. Conduct Social Media and Content Analysis." Also discussed elements of online hate speech and measures to deal with it in an electoral context.

> It is important for governments, IHEC, and civil society organizations to work together to combat these challenges and protect the integrity of elections. This can include implementing effective fact-checking systems, educating the public about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation, and taking action against those who spread false or misleading information.

Misinformation and disinformation pose a serious threat to the integrity of electoral processes. It can create confusion and discourage people from participating in the electoral process, undermining the legitimacy of the election which can erode public trust in the democratic process and make it harder for people to have confidence in the outcome of an election.

It is important for governments, IHEC, and civil society organizations to work together to combat these challenges and protect the integrity of elections. This can include implementing effective fact-checking systems, educating the public about the dangers of misinformation and disinformation, and taking action against those who spread false or misleading information. By taking the following steps, in collaboration with the UN, international communication and national stakeholder's support IHEC could ensure that electoral processes remain fair, transparent, and accountable. The following are general recommendations for combating misinformation, disinformation, infodemics, and hate speech in future elections.

1. **Conduct further research** to better understand the challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation in Iraq and develop more effective strategies to combat these threats. Implement strategies for combating misinformation and disinformation, such as fact-checking mechanisms and collaboration with social media companies.
2. **Engage with the public and media** to raise awareness of the impact of misinformation and disinformation on elections and the importance of seeking out credible sources of information.
3. **Develop and implement a comprehensive media literacy campaig**n to educate the general population about the issue of misinformation and disinformation and how to identify and verify information online.
4. **Establish a dedicated task force/committee** to monitor and track the spread of misinformation and disinformation online and develop counter-messaging strategies to combat it.
5. **Work with social media platforms and other online networks** to identify and remove sources of misinformation and disinformation and develop algorithms and other tools to reduce their spread.
6. **Strengthen existing laws and regulation**s related to the spread of misinformation and disinformation and consider the adoption of new measures where necessary.
7. **Engage with the international community** to share best practices and learn from the experiences of other countries in addressing the issue of misinformation and disinformation.
8. **Timely provide funding or resources** to support the development and implementation of strategies for combating misinformation and disinformation, and strengthen the capacity of staff members to carry out these activities
9. **Enhance collaborations with electoral stakeholders,** including political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), and other government entities, to raise awareness and coordinate joint efforts to mitigate the impact of misinformation and disinformation.