

Whither Iraqi Civil Society?

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Brief Analysis

With Iraq's civil society increasingly losing access to international funding, its members face tough choices about the future.

In the two decades since the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq, enormous amounts of effort, money, and resources have been invested in strengthening Iraqi civil society. Hundreds of organizations now exist to promote democratic initiatives, champion women's economic participation, and advocate for minorities. But a host of internal and international challenges threaten to dry up funding and shift global focus from Iraq, placing the country's civil society in existential danger.

Since 2020, the number of projects and international grants offered to Iraqi civil society organizations has been decreasing as a result of three concurrent situations:

1. the spread of COVID-19, which led countries to focus on internal affairs in order to rehabilitate their economies
2. the European and American focus on supporting Ukraine in its war with Russia
3. [Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's](#) announcement that Iraq has cash reserves of \$100 billion and gold reserves of 130 tons, coupled with the continued rise in global oil prices. Iraq remains among the world leaders in corruption and struggles with transparency in its public finances, but this announcement led donor countries and international organizations to assert that Iraq has ample resources to address socioeconomic issues if the desire is there.

Years earlier, there was a gradual reduction in the number of grants intended for the large number of displaced persons and refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). [To justify work in the region](#), the project designs of the grants cited the presence of local host communities, the potential to reduce the tensions that might arise in the absence of the grants, and the goal of creating harmony among the various groups. The projects generally focused on humanitarian aid rather than development.

Another significant challenge for Iraqi civil society is the steady decline in international aid. The Iraq Humanitarian Fund (IHF), a country-based pooled fund ([CBPF](#)) managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA), is one of the largest international bodies involved in civil society and plays an incredibly important role in direct funding and NGO coordination. However, the IHF has faced significant funding challenges in recent years, with only a fraction of the needed resources secured for 2024.

This shortfall [affects humanitarian response efforts \(https://iraq.un.org/en/160240-united-nations-meets-donors-discuss-development-strategy-iraq\)](#) and critical support for displaced populations. The Financial Tracking Service reported that Iraq received a total of \$62 million in humanitarian funding for 2024, which was only 29.1% of the planned funding needs. This reflects a broader issue of [decreased international financial support \(https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2024-](#)

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. In 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) highlighted that substantial funding gaps exist for humanitarian efforts in Iraq. For example, the IOM's Iraq Crisis Response Plan required \$6.8 million but had only secured \$488,190, leaving a significant funding gap of 93%. This shortfall **impacts various critical areas**

(<https://crisisresponse.iom.int/index.php/response/iraq-crisis-response-plan-2024>) including displacement monitoring, climate change assessment, and the integration of internally displaced persons (IDPs).

As discussed in a **previous article (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-civil-society-and-funding-crisis>)**, there are those who lament Iraqi civil society's reliance on international funding, claiming that many organizations are beholden to external agendas. Despite these criticisms, such funding is essential for NGOs in Iraq and many countries in the region. Cutting off these grants would choke Iraqi civil society, and undermine a fundamental pillar of Iraqi democracy. As the saying goes, there is no democracy without civil society and no civil society without democracy. In fact, NGOs are so important that the term is almost synonymous with civil society in post-Baath Iraq. From initial planning to fundraising to final implementation, the amount of influence NGOs have over decision-making, formulating social contracts is difficult to overstate.

NGOs can be stratified into seven main paths depending on the aspect of civil society that they govern:

The seven paths are: 1) direct provision of services; 2) raising awareness; 3) capacity-building; 4) protection of groups; 5) advocacy campaigns; 6) government performance monitoring; 7) participation in decision-making.

The irony is that the need for funding and the amount of funding available decreases as organizations move from the first level to the seventh, yet the influence on society increases. It is important to note that these interventions have all made important contributions towards dispelling extremist ideas, spreading democratic values, fostering a spirit of tolerance, and establishing or defending **rights**. If funding for civil society organizations is cut off without local resources able to ensure the continuity of NGOs, volunteer groups, and civil activities, all of the aforementioned progress will be at risk.

These organizations cannot be lost, as the effects on Iraqi society would be **tragic**. In hindsight, it was clear that international support would eventually dry up, or at least change its form and intervention mechanisms, and it would have been better to prepare for this gradually. In the present, however, there are two strategies that may yet save Iraqi civil society from the brink:

First, **it is vital to create a local community dynamic that encourages and sustains philanthropy** without relying on outside support. By building civil society capacities to obtain diverse sources of funding while simultaneously educating the local community on the importance of civil society and civic activities, philanthropic organizations can continue to support the democratic process and ensure its continuity.

Second, lines of communication between international organizations and local activists must be maintained. While international institutions and their personnel may not remain, it is essential for Iraq to remain on their radar so they can study the situation, provide solutions, and partner with local organizations. This is what Chinese and Russian interventions do in some countries: provide long-term planning and diverse support mechanisms, with the idea that "a little that lasts is better than a lot that does not." This is the opposite of what American and European donors have often done, sometimes pumping significant funds into short-term projects and inadvertently opening the door for corruption.

The aforementioned efforts have the potential to reinvigorate civil society, but unfortunately significant political roadblocks still exist. The Iraqi democratic process is controlled by major political parties, most of them sectarian or rigidly nationalistic in nature and very few focusing on **practicalities such as projects**. After reaching power through consensus and quota-sharing, they have used many corrupt means to increase their wealth. The parties have become tools for seizing public funds to benefit influential members, while the government has become the cash cow for these parties and individuals, who have taken control not only of government but also of the private sector. By co-opting the private sector, partisan elements and corrupt officials can effectively prevent NGOs from acquiring funding outside of the state apparatus.

The state's infiltration into the private sector is part of a broader consolidation of power by the government in Baghdad. Iraqi politics is becoming increasingly centralized, gradually moving away from the idea of decentralization. Regions that once held a significant degree of autonomy—like the KRI—are now seeing their independence chipped away.

Immediately after the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003, many political actors were opposed to the decentralized, federal system

that was implemented. Now, however, many of these same political actors are interested in reconsidering the concept, even though they recognize that this will be difficult given that it is enshrined in the constitution.

As much of the external funding appears to be drying up and internal funding is virtually nonexistent, many civil society organizations will soon cease to exist. The organizations that remain will be those with close connections to the parties possessing influence and money, most of them from the political class. In addition, politicians have been starting and funding their own organizations. All of these scenarios illustrate the dire state of Iraqi civil society.

The few remaining independent NGOs will be restructured by political parties and their main figures to implement their agendas, or will be influenced by the politically polarized private sector interests, which—directly or indirectly—will not necessarily represent the organization’s broader vision, mission, or civic goals. Most of the focus will go to direct services and providing assistance to court the votes of specific segments of the population. They will not be active in advocacy campaigns or monitoring the government’s performance. Even if they were, it would be for the sake of serving one party over another, rather than to defend human rights issues or engage in civil advocacy that protects the rights of all citizens and promotes a culture of democracy. These efforts would instead represent the agendas of specific political parties rather than the interests of Iraqi citizens at large.

For their part, Iraqi civil society organizations also bear some of the blame. Most have failed to take bold action to become a significant force in bringing about change and influencing decision-making. While some have had an impact in certain areas, civil society as represented by NGOs have failed to become strong, active, influential, or effective as a whole. International organizations have also invested in ineffective organizations and created partnerships with them; treated local organizations as executive contractors rather than partners; had weak follow-up and evaluation of project success; and focused on short-term projects instead of long-term strategic projects, with weak coordination between donors and workers. Stories of corruption involving civil society organizations, some of them international, have also reinforced the negative image of civil society and activists in general.

Modern democratic societies—and those transitioning towards democracy—hinge upon the independence of their public sectors, private sectors, and civil societies. This does not mean they do not cooperate or coordinate, but rather work in partnership. In the end, Iraq has a weak private sector that is politically polarized and a semi-independent civil society that will soon be suffocated. This will leave the field wide open to political parties that seize the public sector with the goal of moving toward centralization, unrestrained by any limitations on their power. Will these partisan forces seize full control and rule under the pretense of democratic system? **Perhaps Iraq’s form of democracy has become unfit for the tasks it faces—or was never fit in the first place—and a more effective form is needed.** ❖

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