

# Iraqi Civil Society and the Funding Crisis

by [Abdulsalam Medeni \(/experts/abdulsalam-medeni\)](/experts/abdulsalam-medeni)

Nov 16, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/almjtm-almdney-alraqy-wazmt-altmwyl\)](/ar/policy-analysis/almjtm-almdney-alraqy-wazmt-altmwyl)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abdulsalam Medeni \(/experts/abdulsalam-medeni\)](/experts/abdulsalam-medeni)

Abdulsalam Medeni is the chief executive director of the Rwanga Foundation in Iraqi Kurdistan. Medeni is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

**Financial support for NGOs is a lifeline for their survival and sustainability. For its part, the Iraqi government should realize that a strong civil society benefits the government, as NGOs can be a vital contribution to governance efforts and societal support.**

Soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, hundreds of non-government organizations (NGOs) sprung up across Iraq. International bodies played a pivotal role in funding, training, and organization, and with this support, Iraqi organizations quickly grew in size and scope. Iraqi NGOs provided important services for the country, including aiding victims of war and violence, providing legal support to marginalized groups, and championing the principles of peace, coexistence, human rights, women's empowerment, accountability for government officials and election monitoring.

In Iraq, both after the 1990s and following the country's liberation from the grip of the Baath Party, funding for NGOs relied entirely on international donor organizations. In both instances, the dire need for direct humanitarian aid took precedence over development projects and training programs. After U.S. forces officially withdrew from Iraq in 2012, NGOs feared the loss of their funding. In an effort to allay these anxieties, a group of U.S. organizations began to lay the groundwork to ensure the sustainability and self-reliance of NGOs in the years to come.

However, this historical role has proved a challenge as Iraqi NGOs seek to find their footing in today's Iraq. Despite a stated focus on long-term development, the societal perception is often that these NGOs are relief organizations, not civil society institutions that need domestic as well as international support. Moreover, while these organizations face a number of challenges in the field, perhaps the greatest obstacle for Iraqi NGOs is the concern for securing funding amid shifting political currents.

## Funding Models and Challenges

Currently, grants to NGOs can be divided into two groups: overseas grants and grants provided by organizations in the field. Overseas grants are provided by international organizations that do not have a work program or office in

the country. These organizations (typically from Europe and the U.S.) make periodic visits to communicate directly with local Iraqi organizations. Local organizations often initially contact these organizations through their websites, or by opening communication channels with international organizations by participating in training courses and conferences abroad. However, Iraqi NGOs struggle to effectively initiate communication with important international donors, one of the most primary impediments to securing funding.

As for grants provided by organizations operating in the field—such as the NDI, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and United Nations (UN) agencies—there are two main types provided to Iraqi institutions. In the first and most common case, international entities come up with specific work programs and look for local partner organizations to contract with them and implement a specific program or project designed by the international organization. While this type of program is a good opportunity for Iraqi organizations to get funding to continue operating and expand their capabilities, the externally driven programs often fail to adequately reflect actual needs on the ground.

Nor do these types of grants foster greater independence for these NGOs; the role of the local organization in this case is passive and limited to implementation. Some local organizations may be hired to work in a field outside of their specialty, deferring instead to the specialty of the entity that provides or attracts the grant.

The second type of grants comes from international organizations that provide grants in response to project proposals designed by local organizations. This type of funding is preferable, as it provides local organizations with a large space to propose ideas and solutions that correspond to the needs of the local community in which they operate.

Yet in either model, Iraqi NGOs remain mostly reliant on external sources of funding. Unlike non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in many other countries, Iraqi NGOs do not receive any support from the Iraqi government. The procedures of the NGO Directorate in Baghdad and Erbil are also becoming increasingly arbitrary, restricting the funding of NGOs with complex, quasi-intelligence procedures. They have even gone so far as to shut down some organizations under various pretexts.

The situation is not much better when it comes to the private sector. While the private sector is often the most important source of funding for NGOs in other countries, this is not the case in Iraq. This disinterest in NGOs is a costly mistake on the part of Iraqi businesses. The private sector should realize that supporting civil society bolsters its image by adding a humanitarian element to its work. Such participation is critical for achieving governance in society.

Ultimately, financial support for NGOs is a lifeline for their survival and sustainability. International bodies can do their part by shifting more grants towards the model that allows local NGOs to prioritize their specialties and identified needs on the ground. But local actors can also make changes to address these funding issues. First, local Iraqi organizations should work to build their capacities and improve their skills, especially in communication, so that they can deal effectively with international donors in a way that attracts funding for these organizations and ensures their sustainability.

For its part, the government should realize that a strong civil society benefits the government as well, as NGOs can be a vital contribution to governance efforts and societal support. It should work to establish a state budget fund earmarked for projects that are in line with the country's development plans, with transparent and fair mechanisms based on competitive bidding to find the most suitable civil society partner.

The private sector must also assume its social responsibility and begin to actively support NGOs. This should be encouraged through state policies that boost the private sector's participation. Possible actions include reducing taxes or integrating private sector donations into the tax system imposed on companies. This approach would help

incentivize the private sector to actively contribute to sustainable development in Iraq and boost the growth and sustainability of NGOs. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Profile: Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas

Nov 16, 2023

♦  
Abdullah Hayek

(/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Jewish Extremist Violence in the West Bank Could Trigger a Second Front

Nov 16, 2023

♦  
Neomi Neumann

(/policy-analysis/jewish-extremist-violence-west-bank-could-trigger-second-front)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Polisario Attack on Smara: A Worrying Escalation for Morocco

Nov 15, 2023

♦  
Ahmad Sharawi,  
Mohsine El Ahmadi

(/policy-analysis/polisario-attack-smara-worrying-escalation-morocco)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-  
analysis/iraq)