POSTWAR DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAQ'S MID-EUPHRATES REGION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although relatively prosperous and stable, the mid-Euphrates region of Iraq has not been successful in producing a civil society that promotes and produces democratic growth. The presumed association between civil society and democratization has been studied extensively at the national level in the Middle East. This report, by contrast, proposes a subnational study of civil society development, arguing that the conditions that foster civil society organizations' (CSOs) development and that mechanisms linking civil society to democratization are not constant throughout Iraq. By relying on novel data collected through fieldwork and interviews conducted with activists and international aid workers, this report argues that subnational and provincial-level political and social dynamics influenced the differential development of civil society.

The report provides a bird's-eye view of civil society development in southern Iraq, then focuses on the cases of Karbala and Hillah, which despite sharing many commonalities, have developed different types of CSOs. For example, Hillah has more organizations involved in advocacy and Karbala has more organizations that are involved in charity. This is a result of donor patterns in the two cities, where Karbala has tapped into local networks and is responsive to local perceptions of what civil society should look like, while Hillah has been influenced by the role of international organizations in the early 2000s. The two cities, as well as the rest of the country, are plagued by the issue of "ghost organizations" which are registered only to be eligible for available funding, and then disappear after funding has dried up. Ghost organizations represent one of the many challenges that the international donor communities face when dealing with civil society in Iraq, in addition to the challenges of identifying and providing training for smaller organizations. There are many challenges that Iraqi activists and local organizations share, and the cases of Karbala and Hillah demonstrate how the path from civil society development to democratization is paved with roadblocks. Even in areas that are relatively safe and wealthy, social and economic relics of war and authoritarianism shape how people interact with and view associational life.

INTRODUCTION

The link between civil society and democratization, though debated in both academic and policy discourses, continues to motivate international support for civil society organizations in many non-democratic and transitioning states. In the American foreign policy context, it has motivated the establishment of initiatives like the State Department's U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and, in Iraq, a focus promoting civil society growth after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Nevertheless, nearly two decades later, many areas in Iraq are overlooked by international organizations and donors when it comes to supporting civil society. This report examines one such region — south-central Iraq or the mid-Euphrates (specifically, Karbala and Babel provinces) — which despite having a relatively stable security environment for over a decade, has been unable to develop democratic institutions at the local level and has instead become a center of popular discontent, one of the main sources of instability in Iraq today. This report explains how civil society developed in south-central Iraq and how it can best be supported by the international community, which still has an interest in a stable and democratizing Iraq.

Criticisms of foreign support for civil society tend to either highlight the failure to fund civil society altogether or the failure to identify the "correct" CSOs to fund. These criticisms are well-founded, but nevertheless tend to overlook the challenges that donors face in selecting and promoting CSOs. This report additionally examines these challenges and how they can lead to suboptimal decisions in civil society promotion in the Iraqi context.

The report proceeds as follows: first, I provide a review of the scholarship on civil society and democratization, drawing on evidence from throughout the world, and then focusing on the findings from the Middle East. From this analysis, I find that civil society is as described by scholars: a "neutral multiplier" which reinforces the political context that it exists within.[1] In transitioning and post-conflict environments, civil society presents an additional challenge of overwhelming limited state capacity with demands for accountability that it cannot respond to, thereby undermining citizen trust in a state that is in the process of rebuilding.[2]

In the proceeding section, I present a brief overview of the history of civil society development in Iraq, focusing on the period of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime (1979-2003) and how it decimated and subsumed civil society entirely under the one-party state. I then discuss the landscape of Iraqi civil society following the demise of the dictatorship, when there was a sudden growth in the number and diversity of CSOs providing services ranging from humanitarian assistance to cultural and historical preservation. As of July 2018, the Iraqi Non-Governmental Organizations Directorate, the official body tasked with registering CSOs, listed 3,648 registered organizations working across 17 sectors in Iraq — not including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).[3] I use this dataset to map out the types of organizations in Iraq, with a particular focus on the south-central region, which includes Babel, Basra, Karbala, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Qadisiyyah, Thi Qar, and Wasit provinces.

Following this bird's-eye view of Iraqi civil society after 2003, I present comparative case studies of two cities: Karbala and Hillah. I selected these cities for three reasons: first, these case studies are unique because they are frequently neglected by research on CSOs in Iraq, which largely focuses on Baghdad and Erbil, with

some work on Mosul and the territories that are disputed by the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Secondly, and similarly, the international aid community is increasingly becoming aware of the neglect that southern and south-central Iraq has faced in terms of development. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these cities are on average more stable and more prosperous than other cities in Iraq and in the south, and yet, despite this, they are sites of popular discontent. Arguably, civil society has had the most space to develop in these settings. By relying on both quantitative analysis as well as in-depth interviews with activists and heads of CSOs in both cities, I demonstrate that different types of organizations exist in each of these cities, and what impact these organizations can have on local and national-level politics and state-building.

It is their impact on local and national politics that makes CSOs important venues for investment by international organizations and foreign missions seeking to promote good governance and democratization in Iraq. By drawing upon interviews with diplomats and individuals working for these organizations, I examine how international donors interact with CSOs and the challenges they face in identifying organizations and in supporting them without diluting their mission, challenging their local legitimacy, or making them dependent. Finally, I synthesize the findings from national-level analysis, case studies, and donor community interviews to present ideas for how international organizations can support civil society in Iraq.

THEORIES OF "GOOD" AND "BAD" CIVIL SOCIETY

I define civil society as a discursive and voluntary space of self-sustaining associations built around social norms and interests, that exists outside of the state and the market but is influenced and shaped by them. Much of the scholarly contention surrounding definitions of civil society lies at the periphery, where civil society interacts with other entities, like the state or the market. This is manifested by the linkages that are assumed to exist between democracy, economic development, and civil society.

The underlying assumption in this school of thought is that if civil society is the embodiment of the collective energy and interests of a society, then it should be a democratizing force, not necessarily in the procedural sense, but in the classic sense: that it is a manifestation of the desires of the masses. Therefore, associational life promotes democratization through an individual mechanism and as a collective. At the individual level, it instills civic values and trains citizens to engage in democratic discourse as well as provides them with organization and communication skills. As a collective, it serves as a means of expressing citizen interest and can represent and advocate for those interests in dialogue with the state, or in certain settings, in opposition to it.

Countless theoretical and empirical work has been done to sustain this argument, ranging from Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti's classic study of associational life in Italy to Theda Skocpol's work on early American associations.[4] The link between democracy and civil society has been addressed from two angles: does democracy engender civil society or does civil society

engender democracy? Cases from Latin America to Central Europe suggest the democratizing force of civil society while others studying contemporary Russia and China might suggest that without democracy, there can be no civil society.

The contentions in this debate reflect a broader tension between understandings of civil society that stem from democratic cases and alternative understandings that arise from authoritarian or transitional settings, including post-communist ones.[5] These latter cases demonstrate that the relationship between the state and society is not categorical, but interactive. Simply stated, civil society does not wait until citizens have full liberties and a just state to emerge, but rather, it emerges when restrictions on liberties begin to relax. As such, a transitioning post-conflict state like Iraq can have a civil society.

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Scholarship on civil society in non-democratic settings has shown that civil society can be captured by societal actors. Sheri Berman's enduring description of civil society as a "neutral multiplier" expresses how it can be a force that either promotes democracy or further legitimizes authoritarianism.[6] Another strand of literature ignited by Berman's response to Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti highlights how civil society is actually enslaved to its political context and how, as such, it can be a neutral multiplier of either democracy *or* authoritarianism.[7]

In Central Europe, civil society pushed for the transition from communism to democracy.[8] This was also seen in some Latin American cases, like Argentina, where civil society improved the quality of governance and increased accountability and representation.[9] In other Latin American cases, like Brazil and Mexico, civil society only emerged through the process of democratization, and not as an instigator of it.[10] While these cases all display a relationship between civil society and democratization, there are some cases of civil society existing without democracy and without even the potential to push for democratic change. For example, in China and Russia, the authoritarian state itself endorses civil society insofar as it unburdens the state of some of its (welfare-providing) duties. At the same time, these regimes maintain a corporatist hold on civil society.[11]

This is the case in some Middle Eastern countries as well (including Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian territories), where civil society is allowed to exist insofar as it abides by and to an extent, mimics the guidelines and political structures set by the state.[12] Thus, studies of civil society in the Middle East provide evidence that viewing civil society organizations as an engine of democratization is a complicated assumption. For example, although the Kurdistan Region of Iraq gained de facto autonomy from Saddam Hussein ahead of the rest of Iraq in 1991 and developed a civil society, it was unable to democratize.[13]

Thus, studies have yielded two opposing outcomes: civil society can be a democratizing force ("good" civil society) and sometimes it can be a legitimizer of the status quo ("bad" civil society). However, studies from transitional contexts have uncovered an additional level of complexity, that civil society can delay

democratic consolidation if it overpowers a weak state undergoing transition. In his analysis of civil society and democratic consolidation in Spain and Brazil, Omar G. Encarnación demonstrates that despite Brazil having a flourishing civil society post-authoritarianism, it was not able to transition smoothly to a democracy.[14] Conversely, Spain had a successful democratic transition while having a weak civil society. Moreover, having associational life does not always translate into have social capital. Brazil, for example, boasts a bustling associational life but very little social trust, which complicates the relationship between civil society and democratic consolidation.[15] Most recently, Sharan Grewal's examination of Tunisia's nascent democracy shows that the country's powerful civil society was partly responsible for both easing its early transition into democracy and complicating democratic consolidation nearly a decade later.[16]

Thus, the literature on civil society and democracy has matured from claiming a straightforward relationship to examining the many ways in which civil society is a complicated actor which can promote democratization just as easily as it can hinder it. These collective findings suggest two things for the international aid community: that the goal of strengthening civil society should not be premised only on democratization, but also on the other benefits to society that associational life can confer and, secondly, that advocacy-oriented organizations are not the only or most direct route to democratic consolidation. This literature has provided multiple ways in which civil society can be assessed: including the quality of civil society (the types of organizations), the quantity of civil society (the number of organizations in existence), or the rate of associational life (the citizen to organization ratio). There are, of course, ways to measure associational life through social trust, public willingness to volunteer time and resources, and other indicators.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRAQI CIVIL SOCIETY

The earliest manifestations of civil society in Iraq were intellectual gathering spaces, usually coffeehouses, as well as salons and social clubs for professional organizations.[17] Even prior to the formation of the modern state of Iraq, there were intellectual and literary clubs, including the Islamic Renaissance Society in Najaf, which brought together intellectuals, seminary students, and clerics.

The establishment of the modern Iraqi state dates to the coronation of King Faisal I on August 23, 1921.[18] Under the monarchy, Iraq boasted an impressive civil society that included groups that actively bridged the society-state divide, such as the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce and the Iraqi Bar Association, whose role Zuhair Humadi likened to the role of the American Civil Liberties Union.[19] Most organizations, however, operated in the political space accorded to them and did not confront the state. This allowed cultural and social organizations to emerge, including professional and artistic syndicates such as the Iraqi Writers Association and Society for Modern Art, as well as the Women's Renaissance Society in 1924.[20] Moreover, as Iraq developed economically, its labor force also organized into unions, which frequently challenged the state through demonstrations.[21] This activity continued well into the formation of the Iraqi Republic, which was established through a coup in 1958.[22] By 1959, the Iraqi Republic had over 200 labor unions registered.[23]

These gains were almost entirely undone by the Baathist regime, which ascended to power in 1968 and took on a totalitarian form with Saddam Hussein's rise to the presidency in 1979. The Baathist state eradicated independent civil society and forced associational life into the mold of the one-party state. This included taking over interest and syndicate groups, creating Baathist party subsidiaries in university and school campuses, and controlling every facet of public life. As one example, many women's groups were dissolved and replaced with the state-sponsored General Federation of Iraqi Women.[24]

The Baath Party went further in its eradication of communal expressions of identity and targeted religious groups participating in mass public rituals; most prominently, it repeatedly tried to clamp down on Shia religious pilgrimages, which given their voluntary nature and devotion to service provision can be considered a form of associational life. By the 1990s, it tried to enforce control on religious institutions and substitute them with state-sponsored ones, as part of the Faith Campaign, a government-led initiative to increase religiosity in Iraq.[25] The Baathist state eradicated private organizations and preyed on any associations not tied to the state. In other words, it eradicated both formal civil society and prevented citizens from organizing informally.

Following the 2003 invasion, civil society went through another transformation in Iraq. First, international NGOs flocked to the country to provide all sorts of services, from humanitarian relief to advocacy and development, as tends to happen in post-conflict settings. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, these organizations numbered about 200 and were expecting to meet a major humanitarian and migration crisis. By July 2003, there were only 60 left.[26]

Concurrently, Iraqis began setting up their own forms of associational life in traditional civil society form (e.g. charitable organizations), as well as taking back the independence of groups co-opted during the Baathist era (e.g. professional syndicates).[27] According to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), there were nearly 400 Iraqi CSOs as of 2004, and the United Nations and the Ministry of Planning claimed even greater numbers sought registration.[28] In addition, Iraqis almost immediately began to form informal networks and social groups that had been surveilled and punished under the Baath Party.

Initially, foreign funding was used to support fledgling civil society organizations, which devoted themselves to a wide array of activities thought to support the transition to democratization in the long run. These activities ranged from development to women's rights advocacy to humanitarian relief. Per my interviews with organizations in south and central Iraq, this funding was sometimes managed through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which were civil-military units established and led by the U.S. and its coalition partners that supported provincial governments in the mid-2000s.[29] This, as well as other forms of support from international organizations, created an initial wave of civil society energy, not all of which was devoted to the stated missions of organizations. Over time, certain forms of funding declined and others, requiring a different skillset (connections with international organizations, grant-writing and networking abilities) arose.

Civil society in Iraq had transformed and had begun to look like that in other states in the region. With that transformation, international donor goals changed as well. No longer was the goal to simply have civil society organizations in existence, but now the quality and durability of an organization were key. Iraq had shifted from authoritarianism, where the existence of independent CSOs in of itself is a success, to a politically transitioning state where the expectations were higher. International donors were still interested in supporting Iraqi organizations, but as events unfolded in Iraq, their focus was captured by advocacy groups who worked towards human rights and women's rights — and, particularly after the protest movement of 2019, towards organizations that channeled youth energy into activism.[30] At the same time, these donors wanted to invest in organizations that were not dependent on foreign funding and that showed longevity, originality, and growth potential.

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY AFTER 2003

Perhaps the best way to understand how civil society has transformed with politics after 2003 is to examine its place in and relationship with the Iraqi state. In this report, I do so by examining data from the Iraqi NGO Directorate. The NGO Directorate falls under the direction of the deputy secretary general of the Council of Ministers and thus has ties to the Prime Minister's Office. The previous governmental body tasked with civil society management was the Ministry of Planning, which registered foreign and local organizations operating in Iraq after 2003. The transition to a separate organization, under the Council of Ministers Secretariat, suggests a governmental recognition of the importance, even if only symbolically, of recognizing and managing the state's relationship with associational life.

It is crucial to note that the NGO Directorate registry provides insight into an important subset of Iraqi civil society, but *not its entirety*. This report highlights the gaps of the NGO Directorate and the ways in which activists approach it, particularly how they perceive its importance when it comes to their relationship with the government and with international actors and donors. Moreover, the discussion around the NGO Directorate and the law that governs organizational life in Iraq allows an important glimpse into the primary concerns of activists operating in Iraq, both local and foreign.

The Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (Law No.12 of 2010) was ratified on March 2, 2010 and was well-received and heralded as a victory for civil society in the Middle East, by international and local organizations and activists.[31] One of the key aspects of the law is that it allows local NGOs to receive funding from and interact with foreign organizations without state approval. Moreover, the law made registration straightforward and organizations seeking registration less likely to be rejected. However, in practice, local organizations describe the registration

process as both burdensome and tiringly bureaucratic. Therefore, it is conceivable that there are small local organizations operating without registration and that the organizations that do register are well-established, organized, or politically connected and thus have the capacity to do so.

In addition to these, there are other concerns with relying on the NGO Directorate to provide a complete image of Iraqi civil society. These issues arose when I analyzed its annually updated database of all organizations in Iraq, including their name, address, phone number, name of founder, email address, and self-selected type of organization. In this report, I rely on two different lists: one from 2015 which I modified to examine organizations at the district level across only south-central Iraq and one from 2018, which I examined the landscape of civil society at the provincial level across all Iraq, except for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[32] Because I conducted most of my fieldwork in 2016-2017, I used the 2015 dataset to select CSOs to interview and used the 2018 dataset to update the quantitative analysis. In addition, the 2018 dataset differs from the 2015 dataset in that the NGO Directorate categorizes NGOs by type in 2018. In 2015, I had to code the NGOs myself, relying on their descriptive names to uncover their focus. The NGO Directorate stopped publishing this information in 2019, citing the tense environment for civil society after the October 2019 movement as the reason, according to a government official.[33]

In addition to the analysis of these datasets, I provide qualitative evidence from case studies in two cities: Karbala and Hillah. I interviewed multiple civil society organizations in each of these cities to introduce more complexity to the quantitative analysis. I selected these cities, as mentioned earlier, for three reasons. First, they are understudied in the contemporary literature on Iraq. Second, they are relatively safe and prosperous cities whose citizens were largely unencumbered by the high degree of violence felt elsewhere in Iraq, but nevertheless felt grievances and channeled them into protest behavior. And, finally, they are from the south-central region of Iraq, which the international aid and development communities, who have previously overlooked this region, have demonstrated a desire to shift focus towards.

In the process of analyzing the databases, I first came across the issue of "ghost organizations." Ghost organizations are CSOs that are registered with the NGO Directorate but have no office, staff, or even a functioning phone line. This issue first arose in a conversation with a member of a charitable organization in Karbala who bemoaned how much work and how little support there was from other CSOs. He said "167 organizations [registered] in Karbala, but really, there are only about 40 that we know of."[34] Interviews with other CSOs in Karbala and Hillah suggested that there were anywhere between 10 to 50 active organizations in the city. In Hillah, activists also complained of ghost organizations, citing numbers in the teens as the true figure. Of course, ghost organizations are not unique to Iraq and speak to the incentives behind registration.

I tried to root out ghost organizations in a subset of the registry from 2015. I randomly selected 40 CSOs from each of the two cities and called them to arrange interviews. I then kept track of which ones picked up the phone and which ones had a disconnected number. Although not having a working phone number does not necessarily mean the organization is a ghost, it is a strong signal of inactivity.

I found that of those 40 organizations I called in Karbala, 11 picked up the phone and six had disconnected numbers. For the remaining, the phone rang without anyone answering, even though I attempted to call three times (over the course of three weeks). The situation was starker in Hillah, where I could barely reach four (arranging for interviews in Hillah proved more difficult).

As activists explained to me, ghost organizations are intentionally created for specific reasons and tend to be short-lived. International donors know individual activists in Iraq, *not* organizations.[35] When they have a pool of money, they reach out to their contacts and encourage them to register as an NGO, in order to be eligible to receive the funds. The registration process is difficult and takes months, so by the time the CSO is finally registered, the funds have often already been diverted elsewhere, leaving behind a ghost organization. This problem does not necessarily suggest ulterior motives from the activist or the organization, but rather, suggests that communication lines between CSOs and international donors are weak.

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Another long-time activist in Hillah explained that there was a flurry of CSO activity in the aftermath of the American-led occupation because of the large funds that were being invested into building Iraqi society via PRTs, as well as through international organizations.[36] He specifically pointed out the presence of a U.S. Regional Embassy Office in Hillah (now closed), providing incentive to create organizations fast.[37] American withdrawal (monetarily and physically) left behind ghost organizations.

However, data from the NGO Directorate shows that the average age of an organization in south-central Iraq is about 5.2 years, placing the average year of establishment about a decade after the U.S.-led invasion. This suggests that the ghost organizations described to me in interviews are not the same ones listed in the NGO Directorate's list.

TABLE 1

Average age of registered CSOs in southern provinces (as of July 2018)

PROVINCE	AGE	PROVINCE	AGE
Babel	5.85 years	Najaf	4.88 years
Basra	4.85 years	Qadisiyyah	5.39 years
Karbala	4.95 years	Thi Qar	5.35 years
Maysan	4.87 years	Wasit	5.31 years
Muthanna	5.43 years		

Source: Iraqi NGO Directorate

Ghost organizations are not only relics of the American occupation, they are also the result of the Iraqi government not providing funds to CSOs. Many of the CSOs heads I spoke with suggested that they had registered because they expected some sort of monetary support from the government. Under the NGO law, the Iraqi government is under no obligation to fund civil society — however, there is a widespread belief amongst CSOs that they are entitled to money from the government. This belief may be a legacy of the Saddam-era corporatist state which provided funds to state-subservient organizations and which fostered a culture of reliance on the state at both the individual and organizational level. It manifests in other ways as well, including, for example the strong preference for public sector employment in Iraq.

The false promise of this money, one activist said, explains the presence of ghost organizations. The phenomenon of ghost organizations is something of which the donor community is aware. As time progressed, it developed requirements for longevity in programs and organizations receiving support. However, at the same time it has not been able to address a larger and often-discussed issue: how to move away from organizations which have developed a set repertoire of performances and services that attract foreign funding and are almost entirely reliant on it. These are by no means challenges that are unique to the Iraqi context, but uncovering what type of organizations tend to achieve longevity in Iraq, and what goals they have and functions they perform, is interesting.

In the next section, I present a typology of CSOs that exist in Iraq and break them down geographically, based on data from 2015 and 2018. Then, I present in-depth analysis based on qualitative case studies of the two cities in south-central Iraq: Karbala and Hillah.

A typology of CSOs

Upon registration, the directorate requires that NGOs provide detailed biographical information on their internal membership, contact information including a physical address, financial reports, and internal reports. Some of this information is then made publicly available on the NGO Directorate's registry. In this paper, I coded CSOs by district and function and took into account the population of cities — thus, I look at the number of CSOs/population ratio, rather than the number of CSOs absolutely. The purpose of this dataset is to provide an overview of Iraqi civil society, with a particular emphasis on south-central provinces, and to pave the way for qualitative analysis.

Table 2 presents a typology of Iraqi CSOs which was constructed by analyzing both the descriptions of CSOs and their self-selecting into NGO Directorate categories.[38] It breaks down CSOs into six categories that align with the NGO Directorate's categorization.

TABLE 2

A typology of CSOs

CSO TYPE (SIMPLIFIED)	CSO TYPE: NGO DIRECTORATE DESIGNATION	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES FROM IRAQI CSO DATASET
Advocacy	Women's Affairs; Human Rights; Environment; Democracy	An organization whose goal is to influence public policy indirectly (i.e. not through the use of elections). Advocacy groups tend to promote the rights of certain groups in society or to address state behavior, like fiscal or environmental corruption.	National Center for the Protection of Journalists (Hillah) The National Committee for Hunting and Environmental Protection (Basra)
Charity/ Humanitarian[39]	Children and Orphans; Aid; Humanitarian Assistance; Special Needs	An organization that strives to alleviate poverty and suffering directly through material aid.	Al-Fawatim Association for Caring for Orphans (Najaf) Children with Cancer Humanitarian Organizations (Basra)
Cultural/ Academic and Research	Culture	An organization whose aim is to preserve and promote certain aspects of culture — such as art, literature, or heritage. It also includes academic and religious organizations.	Inma Center for Research (Hillah, Babel) Ahbab Al-Watan for Fine Arts (Diywaniya)
Development	Public Services; Health; Education; Youth; Sustainable Development	An organization that seeks to alleviate suffering and solve societal problems through providing knowledge and training.	Tawasil Center for Development Studies and Civil Dialogue (Diywaniya) Manahil Center for the Development of Agriculture (Al-Musaib)
Hobby	Hobby	An organization that strives to unite people who share common interest in a leisure activity or hobby.	Babylonian Beekeepers Association (Hillah) Collective of Popular Poets and Writers of Iraq (Nasiriyah)
Professional	Media; Agriculture	An organization that unites members based on professional similarities (e.g. career groups, alumni groups).	The Academics of the New Iraq (Amara) Al-Husain Association of Sermon Speakers (Basra)

Figure 1 below breaks down Iraqi civil society by NGO Directorate categories. Figure 2 breaks down organizations by the simplified coding strategy I employ in my analysis, which allows me to collapse categories. Organizations are rarely single mandate and, therefore, the coding I propose is more reflective of reality. The figures shows that the types of organizations traditionally associated with democratization — democracy, human rights, and women's affairs — amount to 644 registered organizations across the country. In the broader designation, advocacy groups — which include all democracy, human rights, and women's affairs groups — take up nearly a quarter of all types of registered CSOs in Iraq.

FIGURE 1

## Iraqi NGOs by type (NGO Directorate categories) as of July 2018
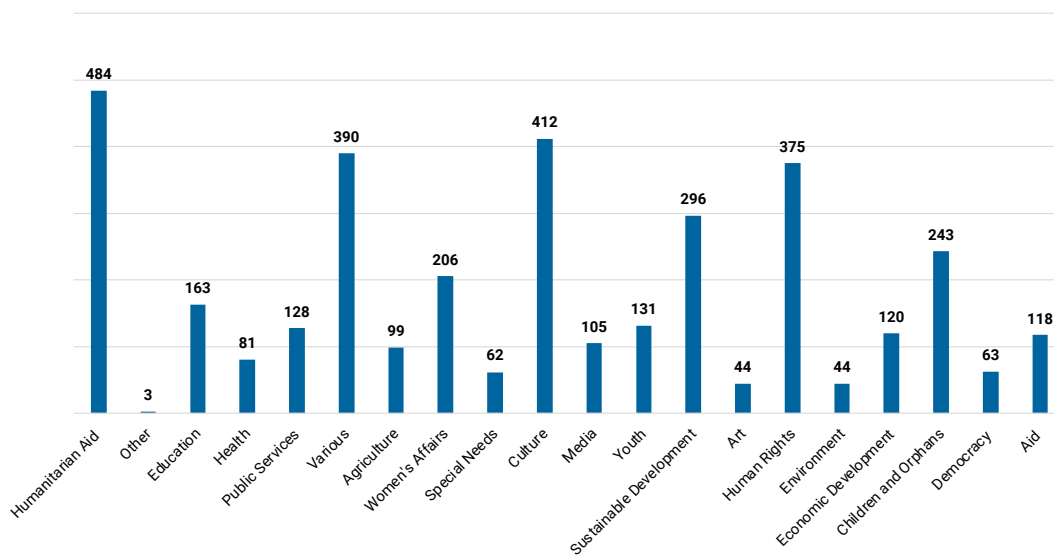
Source: Iraqi NGO Directorate

On the surface, this breakdown suggests that there is an abundance of organizations working on influencing policy and advocating on key social issues in Iraq. However, the reality of everyday life in Iraq suggests otherwise. Moreover, the issue of ghost organizations complicates this claim. First, are advocacy and charity organizations simply more incentivized to register than other types and why? Secondly, is there more funding for advocacy groups? Thirdly, are individuals who create CSOs for ulterior motives — be it for reputational benefit or access to resources — more likely to register as an advocacy group and why?

FIGURE 2

**Iraq NGOs by type (simplified coding) as of July 2018**
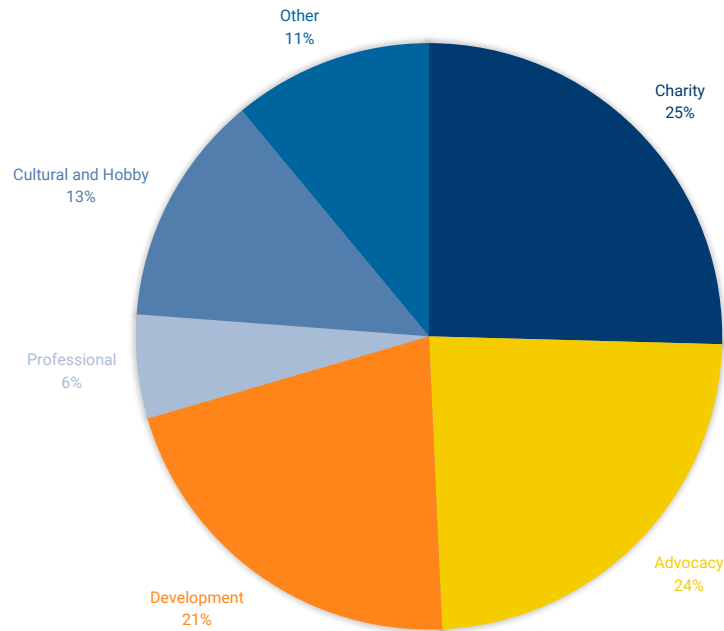
Source: Iraqi NGO Directorate with author's simplified coding

The data from the NGO Directorate provides no answers to these questions. Interviews, however, present reasonable hypotheses. In the section below, I describe how civil society activists in the cities of Karbala and Hillah view the development of associational life in Iraq.

FIGURE 3

Number and type of CSOs in southern Iraqi cities as of 2015
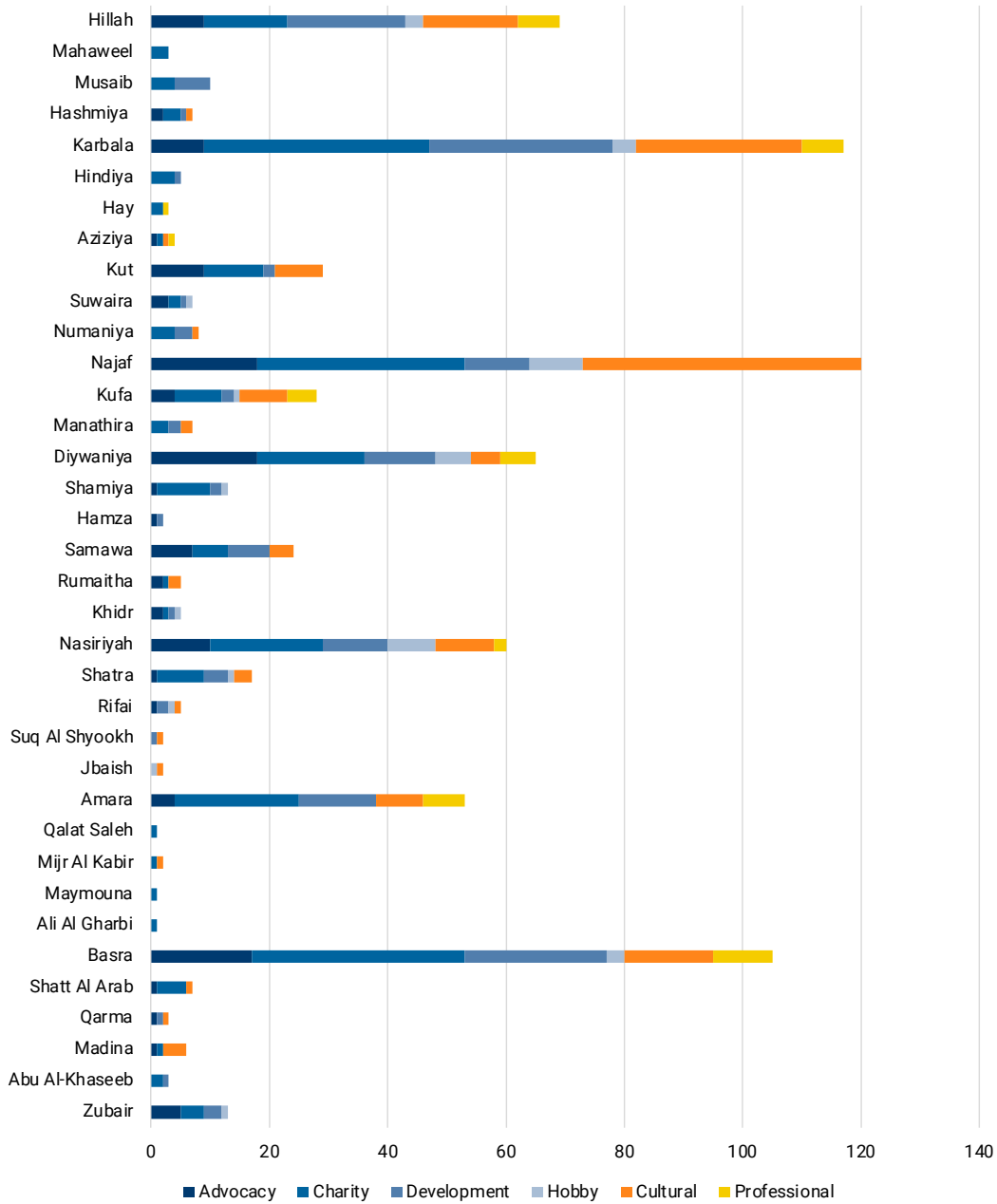
Source: Iraqi NGO Directorate with author's simplified coding

CHALLENGES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The cases of Karbala and Hillah

Having interrogated the trends and challenges presented by nation-wide data, this section examines associational life in two cities in south-central Iraq: Karbala (the capital of Karbala province) and Hillah (the capital of Babel province). These cases are by no means standard cases nor reflective of the ethno-religious diversity of Iraq. In fact, they share many similarities, as shown in Table 3. However, they were selected because they represent some of the most conducive environments for civil society development in post-2003 Iraq. First, these cities experienced a relatively minimal degree of violence in both the 2003 invasion and the subsequent crises that rocked Iraq, sometimes owing to their homogenous ethno-religious identities. Secondly, they are relatively prosperous, particularly in comparison to cities further south. By all accounts, these circumstances should have contributed to creating a space for citizens to convene, organize, and create a vibrant civil society. These cities also have high rate of state-registered CSOs, despite their smaller populations. However, both these cities experienced intense anti-government protests in 2019, in which citizens expressed a dissatisfaction with the Iraqi state along with their co-nationals in other cities in the south-central region of the country. Civil society organizations did not play a role in these movements, many choosing to remain on the periphery.[40] Whether protest movements are considered part of democratic transition or whether their occurrence suggests an inability to transition into democracy, the lack of engagement of civil society in the protest movement and the occurrence of these protests in some of the most secure and prosperous cities in Iraq reveals that the link between civil society and democratic transition and consolidation in the country is weak.

Relatedly, these cities represent a region in Iraq that has received little attention from the development and international aid communities. Due to the war against the Islamic State group, international organizations have understandably focused on communities emerging from conflict in other regions of Iraq. The south and mid-Euphrates have received less attention, even as living conditions decline.[41] Recently, more attention has been paid to critical cities like Basra. Karbala and Hillah, though more prosperous than some other cities in this region, are still part of an Iraq that largely goes unstudied and underserved by the international aid community, by the admission of various individuals working in both development offices of foreign embassies, as well as international organizations. By focusing on these two cases, this report hopes to provide some background information on the environment in this region.

> **Due to the war against the Islamic State group, international organizations have understandably focused on communities emerging from conflict in other regions of Iraq. The south and mid-Euphrates have received less attention, even as living conditions decline.**

An additional advantage of comparing these two cities is that political analysis of Iraq oftentimes is crippled by a fear that religious institutions, symbols, and individuals transform certain areas into outliers or unique cases. In some cities in Iraq, religion is seen to be pervasive in public life and this depiction, whether true or

not, frames much of the discourse on certain cities in the south-center, like Najaf and Karbala. For this reason, examining Karbala and Hillah side by side presents the additional advantage of interrogating whether religious institutions do transform local politics in ways that render their host cities incomparable to their peers. In this case, Karbala, which houses important religion shrines, a religious seminary, and is a site of religious tourism, is ideally juxtaposed against Hillah, which is not as religiously significant.

Of course, this set of paired comparisons comes with its own shortcomings that can be addressed in future research, including, for example the fact that they are not representative of Iraq's ethnic and religious diversity.

The table below provides basic information about the two provinces that the cities are located in and shows their comparability. Some of the information attempts to capture pre-invasion similarities (e.g. childhood malnutrition in 2003). In addition, I include information on voting patterns and poverty and unemployment rates. Unfortunately, much of this information is not available at the district or city level in Iraq. Therefore, what we can establish about the cities independently is their similar historical trajectories, similar population sizes, and their ethno-religious makeup.

TABLE 3

Comparison of Karbala and Babel provinces

|	KARBALA	BABEL
Capital city	Karbala	Hillah
Population (2015-2018)[42]	1,125,646	1,907,327
Urban population (2018)[43]	814,782	996,885
Ethno-religious makeup	Arab Shia	Predominantly Arab Shia with Arab Sunni minority outside of Hillah district
Unemployment rate (2016)[44]	7.1%	7.3%
Youth unemployment rate (2016)[45]	12.1%	11%
Poverty rate (2018-2020)[46]	12%	11%
Childhood malnutrition rate (2003)[47]	3.3%	3.4%
Number of internally displaced persons (2020)[48]	15,846	17,016
Top three political parties in 2018[49]	Fateh Sairoon Nasr	Fateh Sairoon Nasr
Percentage of self-declared "non-voters" in parliamentary elections (2018)[50]	46.2%	51.8%
Trust in CSOs (2018)[51]	36.6%	28.5%

At a glance: Types of CSOs in Karbala and Hillah

Figure 4 shows that Karbala eclipses Hillah in the number of organizations overall, as well as the number of CSOs dedicated to development, charity, and cultural organizations from 2015 to 2018. When broken down further, it seems that Hillah has more CSOs dedicated to agriculture, women's affairs, human rights, and sustainable development than Karbala does.

FIGURE 4

CSOs in Karbala and Hillah by type in 2015 and 2018
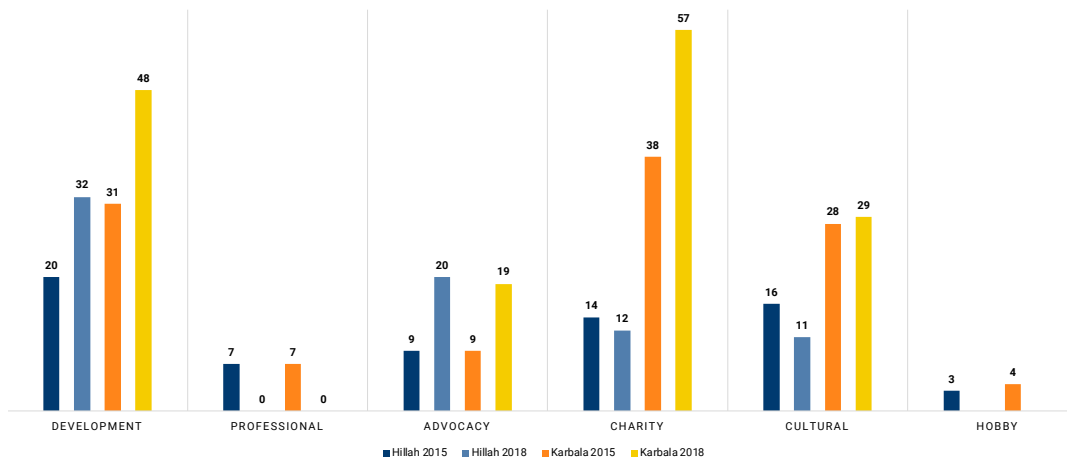
Source: Iraqi NGO Directorate with author's simplified coding

My interviews suggest that in Karbala, CSOs depend on donations from a handful of wealthy local donors, usually businessmen. Occasionally, the wealthy donors are clerics and Shia Islamist politicians.

In addition, advocacy groups are underrepresented in Karbala. This is particularly interesting when considering that advocacy groups, in theory, have the most direct relevance to political transition and democratization. It is advocacy groups, after all, that try to impact the state's agenda and that try to promote particular issues. That they are in fact underrepresented in one of the most stable and prosperous cities in Iraq merits investigation. According to my interviews with Karbala activists, the reason for the underrepresentation of advocacy groups has to do with the nature of associational life in the city. Local donors, who tend to be societal elites with interests in reputational benefits, prefer to finance charitable organizations and activities. As for charitable individuals, they view groups that operate beyond charity as non-traditional or potentially suspicious, showing that the rate of civil society does not correlate with the rate of social trust and capital in Karbala, a feature perhaps normal in post-conflict communities:

"People accuse of us of working for third parties. Especially groups like us [an organization for graduates] because we are professional... we are not recognized as humanitarian or charity... so a person might trust them more... so with groups like us, it's difficult to get people to donate. Sometimes I get donations as a person. They know me as someone who is a civil society activist, but they don't really know about this organization."[52]

The reason Hillah has more advocacy organizations is not that there is more social trust in the city or more local donors. Rather, one of the reasons is because advocacy organizations in Hillah, including those focused on human rights, receive more foreign funding including from the National Endowment for Democracy and other international organizations. Charitable organizations, on the other hand, were able to receive money and in-kind donations from local donors. A member of a social enterprise organization provided an explanation as to why:

"People [in Iraq] have urgent monetary needs. They don't look to satisfy other aspects of their life until they satisfy those monetary needs. This stops human development, which relies on economic development... NGOs were created when Iraq was being rebuilt and the rebuilding process does not align with the wants of the Iraqi citizen."[53]

In other words, the Iraqi public could justify development and charity donations but not advocacy ones, which were deemed extraneous at best and suspicious at worst. What appears to be happening is that Karbala has more locally financed CSOs which are supported by a handful of wealthy donors: owners of factories, hotels, and shopping malls. Thus, increased entrepreneurship from religious tourism seems to have financed Karbala's charitable organizations. One Karbala activist said that there was a reputational benefit for the wealthy to be associated with a charitable CSO. Despite Karbala being a religious city, there was little reference to religious motives for charitable activity.

Interestingly, increased entrepreneurship *has not led* to the establishment of advocacy groups, as traditional models of entrepreneurship would suggest, in which increased economic growth leads to the development of organizations that try to protect that growth from state predation. In fact, none of the organizations I interviewed in Karbala characterized themselves as advocacy groups. By contrast, three of my interviewees in Hillah were directly involved in issues of human rights, which is one type of advocacy group.

These Hillah activists emphasized the impact of the PRTs, many of which were located in Babel province, on the initial phase of civil society development in their city. As previously mentioned, quick financing from PRTs incentivized non-activists to create "ghost" organizations to benefit from the foreign funding. However, PRT funding also allowed some real organizations — including one of those that I had interviewed — to survive.

However, despite this variation in types of organization, Karbala's high number of registered NGOs is not driven by religious organizations. In fact, both cities have a small number of such groups (Karbala has five and Hillah has one). At the same time, the religious undertones of these CSOs are hard to ignore and include such things as having included a religious figure in the name of the organization and participating in activities that commemorate religious holidays and occasions (like

Ramadan or the holy pilgrimages). As one civil society activist from Karbala claimed that "most of the organizations in Karbala have a religious undertone, unlike the organizations in Babel."[54]

The organizations in Karbala are also more networked with the rest of Iraq. In fact, one of the activists from Hillah told me that "everyone goes to Karbala" (in reference to religious pilgrimages) and, as such, organizations in Karbala have stronger ties to other CSOs in Iraq.[55] For example, one Karbala CSO is currently involved in creating an Iraq-wide network of CSOs whose aim is to provide Iraqi citizens with an alternative outlet for their grievances. The group is extremely organized with dedicated subcommittees and partners all throughout Iraq (not just the south-center). CSOs in Karbala, unlike those in Hillah, all seem to have reach outside the province, suggesting some validity to the localized pilgrimage effect fostering trust in outsiders and strengthening national networks.

For example, in their capacity as service-providers, Karbala CSOs were essential for managing the internally displaced persons (IDP) crisis in the wake of the Islamic State group invasion of Mosul in 2014. Civil society activists in Karbala immediately established an "emergency room" and coordinated amongst themselves to manage the IDP influx from the north. I spoke to both the head of the emergency room and the second-in-command and was shown how one CSO in Karbala managed to create a Karbala-wide network of 11 organizations that registered IDPs, discovered their needs, and ensured that they received lodging and food. However, that is not to suggest that CSOs in Hillah did not help IDPs or are not responsive to local crises. In fact, most of the CSOs I spoke to in Hillah — including the Babylonian Beekeepers Association — mentioned gathering donations for IDPs in collaboration with other local CSOs. What distinguishes the Karbala network is that they exhibited greater capacity than the Hillah organizations to organize and implement collective service delivery across a group of local CSOs.

Karbala CSOs use their organizational skills at responding to crises, which makes them valuable to the local government. Indeed, as one activist in Karbala told me "they [the local government] tolerate us because civil society makes them look like democracies."[56] In Hillah, the relationship between CSOs and the local government seems, as one activist described, particularly "collaborative," wherein they work together to set up workshops and festivals for government employees. There is also a lot of inter-organizational collaboration in both districts where CSOs are on friendly terms (in that they provide information to each other) and they know about each other through common conferences and meetings with the local government.[57]

> **Even wealthy individuals and organizations shy away from providing funds to advocacy groups and focus on charitable institutions. Advocacy groups... are thus left to either find extremely creative ways to acquire funding or to seek foreign support.**

The different stories in each of these locales suggests that the development of civil society is not divorced from societal influences, including sometimes the lack of social trust that makes individuals wary of advocacy groups or the desire for reputational benefit that motivates dedication to charitable ones. Even wealthy individuals and organizations shy away from providing funds to advocacy

groups and focus on charitable institutions. Advocacy groups, directly relevant to democratization, are thus left to either find extremely creative ways to acquire funding or to seek foreign support.

CHALLENGES TO FUNDING CIVIL SOCIETY

Foreign donors are aware of the many challenges that face CSOs in transitioning contexts, including the issue of creating durable organizations. Moreover, they face their own challenges in implementation as well.

At the heart of all these challenges is that international donors and organizations have different expectations from an authoritarian state and a democratizing one and that these expectations can be jarring for organizational life emerging from post-conflict settings. In these transitional settings, the view of international organizations and donors is that it is no longer sufficient to simply have an existing CSO propped up by foreign funding. In an authoritarian context, it is perhaps a victory to have an independent CSO merely exist, but the goals are higher in transitioning contexts like Iraq. In my conversations with members of the international donor community, it became apparent that one of the goals of the international community is to create self-sufficiency in the long run.

Logistically, international organizations also face the challenge of having to identify organizations on the ground. In interviews, individuals working for international organizations repeatedly stressed that they were well-aware of the existence of a bias: that those organizations who are most well-equipped to present themselves to international donors may not well represent the entirety of the country. Although members of the international donor community are aware of the existence of smaller organizations that are less savvy at grant writing and outreach, they also find it difficult to find and vet new organizations.

One reason for this is the fear of accidental association with CSOs that have roots to political parties or even armed factions. Because political dynamics differ at the provincial level, international organizations require extra resources to navigate local politics. Moreover, in the Iraqi context, there is also a concern about association, particularly from Western governments, with groups with religious leaning, stemming from an aversion to Islamism and a confusion of the religious with the Islamist. In other words, there is a preference for the secular and liberal, which are often also those most capable at communicating with foreign organizations.

Once due diligence has been done, international organizations have oftentimes invested in providing grant-writing training for CSOs, but many are concerned that by doing so, they are disrupting important work done by these CSOs. Moreover, grant sizes are not always catered to the size of organizations operating on the ground. As can be evidenced from the discussion of the Iraqi NGO Directorate registry, Iraqi organizations tend to be very small and not qualified for the large grants supplied by entities like USAID. In the past, the PRTs were able to work locally and to provide smaller grants that helped support smaller organizations, but few of them are capable of applying to the larger grants available from USAID. Not to mention, even the smaller grants have applications that require a specific skill-set which most Iraqi organizations have yet to develop. Consider, for example, the recent call for proposals issued by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq

(UNAMI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for "Low Value Grants for CSOs engagement in 2021 COR elections."[58] These grants are small enough to support the size of most Iraqi CSOs, but the application itself is onerous to the typical local organization, which in theory is what UNAMI and UNDP seek to support.

What international organizations and donors value in a CSO are signs that it can become self-sustaining in the long run and that it has a clear and transparent budget and management. Fears of misuse of funds also cripple the ways in which foreign funders approach organizations. Much like grant-writing training, the investment in budgetary and administrative training also raises concerns that well-meaning international organizations are inadvertently detracting from the work of CSOs. However, without either the provision of this training or the simplification of smaller grant processes, these local organizations will continue to rely on donations from their own communities or their members, as many of them do.

In conclusion, international organizations have various reasons for shying away from supporting smaller and local NGOs, including the difficulty in identifying and vetting them, the fear that providing grant-writing and other training dilutes their mission, and the lack of availability of appropriately-sized grants for them.

THE PATH FORWARD

Given these sets of challenges, how should international organizations navigate supporting civil society in order to promote good governance and democratic transition? First, it is important to recognize where the challenges stem from and what *shared* challenges there are. From the perspective of organizations, the key challenges are funding, reducing bureaucratic red-tape in registration, and securing societal buy-in. From the perspective of donors, key challenges are identifying new and promising organizations free from political ties and corruption and supporting them without making them dependent.

There is some overlapping space here that can be ripe for cooperation. Civil society activists in Iraq complain that in particular domains — those of human development, human rights, and advocacy — it is hard to convince the local population to donate. Certain issues are simply not important to the average Iraqi donor. At the same time, both members of international organizations, as well as scholars have highlighted the need to create locally sustained organizations through the promotion of voluntarism and support from the local community and the diaspora community.[59] This is a shared problem highlighted by both Iraqi activists and international organizations and it is one that is highly connected to democratization. For one, these are the organizations that deal primarily with the democratic process, through encouraging voter registration, monitoring the performance of the state, and advocating for disempowered societal groups, for example.

Secondly, these types of organizations foster a democratic culture. Perhaps the best way to address the issue at the root is to examine why there is no public buy-in to these types of activities. Is it a lack of trust in civil society overall or simply a lack of trust in government change? If the former, then perhaps recognizing that strengthening organizations that do not cater directly to democratization may be the first to creating the space for a more diverse associational life. Secondly, a

change in perspective may be needed. Perhaps it should be considered a success that a humans rights group exists in a transitioning context, in which citizens are too overwhelmed by other needs to support it. Finally, perhaps training groups not only in applying to grants but in overreach and seeking support from Iraqi diaspora communities, who may have a larger buy-in for these types of organizations than those in Iraq. This is a middle ground between asking the local Iraqi public for support and asking international organizations for support, it allows CSOs to develop the skills for gaining self-sufficiency through communication with an Iraqi donor base, which they can hopefully harness in the future in the local community as well. This type of strategy allows Iraqis to nurture their own civil society and find avenues to self-sufficiency without demanding too much from nascent organizations.

Moreover, although providing training and skills to smaller CSOs may dilute their mission or distract from it, this distraction is not permanent, and it is necessary if these groups are to develop into larger and more self-sufficient organizations. After all, part of self-sufficiency is being able to promote the organization publicly and attract a wide array of donors, both Iraqi and foreign. While the Iraqi public is developing its sense of voluntarism and its willingness (and capability) to finance non-charitable CSOs, these other types of organizations should not be left to perish. Investing in training for smaller CSOs has positive reverberations in the long run. In my interviews and fieldwork, I noticed that activists tend to participate in multiple organizations and to communicate amongst themselves, meaning that skills will also be shared and discussed.

This leaves the problem of identifying CSOs and ensuring that they are independent of ties to political parties or armed factions. The first step to accomplishing this is investing in research on civil society that delves deeper, rather than selecting the most public-facing organizations. This type of research can then be used to identify lesser-known organizations by shedding light on less familiar cities and less addressed topics, which can then be followed by deeper examination of new organizations to ensure their independence and their need. These are all strategies for mitigating common challenges faced by international organizations to also allow local CSOs to grow and overcome their own challenges.

CONCLUSION

This report has examined the development of civil society in south-central Iraq after the 2003 war and following international efforts to foster democratization. Although the literature and experience from the region has left a mixed record of the impact of civil society on democratic consolidation, this report delves into the complexities of civil society development in transitional settings. It highlights some of the challenges that explain why this relationship is not straightforward and some of the successes that demonstrate why promoting civil society is nevertheless beneficial. The report intentionally examines the development of civil society in relatively stable and prosperous cities in the mid-Euphrates region, which despite these conditions, have developed into sites of mass discontent and sources of instability. By focusing on these cases, it cautions against overlooking the south-central region of Iraq in development work and civil society promotion.

The story of civil society in Iraq starts with thousands of registered organizations — with only a fraction truly in operation — claiming to work in humanitarian aid, culture, and human rights. The disparity between operative and non-operative organizations is explained by various factors and mirrored in other post-conflict and democratic settings, including the mixed motivations behind registration, the drying up of easily accessible foreign funds, and societal factors like public mistrust of certain types of organizations.

The story of civil society in Iraq starts with thousands of registered organizations... The disparity between operative and non-operative organizations is explained by various factors and mirrored in other post-conflict and democratic settings.

International organizations seeking to promote organizations at the local level face their own challenges: the difficulty of identifying organizations, the fear of associating with organizations that have ties to political entities or armed factions, and the concern of creating dependent organizations whose mission is diluted by foreign interference. But there are ways to overcome shared challenges including providing training for local CSOs in both seeking funding but also in networking as well as investing in in-depth research on civil society which makes it easier to identify and vet new organizations.

Despite challenges, organizations that cater to local needs and that serve as positive forces of change in society have emerged and have endured in Iraq, although they may not be nearly as numerous as non-operative organizations. For this reason alone, it is worth continuing to invest in civil society.

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