



INVESTING IN IRAQ'S PEACE:

HOW GOOD GOVERNANCE CAN DIMINISH SUPPORT FOR VIOLENT EXTREMISM

After billions of dollars invested, repeated military interventions and hundreds of thousands of lives lost, Iraq remains in crisis. A violent extremist organization, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), controls roughly a third of the country, while sectarian militias, that the Government of Iraq (GOI) relies upon to fight ISIS, are on the rise. Over three million Iraqis have fled Anbar, Nineveh and other areas under the hold of ISIS, creating a significant strain on the rest of the country. Meanwhile, popular discontent over government corruption and poor services has erupted into widespread protests in several areas.

Failing to deal with these multiple crises risks plunging Iraq into further instability. Yet, there is hope, particularly if Iraq's largely peaceful, non-sectarian civil society sector plays a role in bridging the gap between citizens and government. If civil society is able to build an effective alliance with Iraq's reformers in government, and with the strong support of the United States and the international community, this partnership could help to create a new era of accountable, non-sectarian governance in Iraq.

Mercy Corps undertook multi-year research to identify key drivers of instability and leverage points that can help move Iraq (and potentially other fragile states) toward greater stability and sustainable peace. Building on data from three rounds of nationwide public opinion surveys between 2013 and 2015, and in-depth interviews with Iraqi citizens, youth, internally displaced persons, civil society leaders, government officials, and activists, this report presents a vision of an effective response to the crisis in Iraq—one that builds on what's working.

Key Findings

- 1. Poor governance that creates real and perceived injustice is a key driver of conflict.** Although often attributed to sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shias, at a closer look, we find that Iraq's instability is mostly rooted in perceptions of injustice and poor governance, not ancient rivalries. Our survey shows that when aggrieved groups believe government will become more responsive and fair, their support for violence, and the sectarian groups that perpetuate it, decreases.
- 2. While sectarianism is often incorrectly blamed as the main source of conflict, it is nonetheless a threat to future stability.** Despite strong evidence pointing to weak governance as the underlying issue, sectarian divisions have the potential to increase as political opportunists—both domestic and foreign—stoke sectarian tensions to benefit from the instability. This is most clearly seen in the growth of sectarian militias, which risk engulfing Iraq in a divisive internal conflict and present major obstacles to reconciliation
- 3. Iraq's democratic, non-sectarian civil society is vital to improving governance and advancing reconciliation.** Civil society is increasingly gaining the trust of Iraqis and has been a rapidly growing medium for citizen action and voice. In the south and center of the country, youth activists and other civil society actors have successfully channeled citizens' discontent over poor service delivery into sustained, peaceful efforts to combat corruption and government abuses. The key question is whether, in the face of rising expectations and frustrations, civil society is equipped to properly direct new energies – such as those unleashed by the demonstrations – into meaningful political change.



4. **Iraqi youth, too often sidelined, are of vital importance to governance and civil society efforts:** Iraq’s political, social, and economic future hinges on its youth; unfortunately, present trends are not promising. Frustrated youth are emigrating when they can, impoverishing the country’s future, and young men are the foot soldiers of the country’s non-state armed groups. Building a peaceful future for Iraq will require empowering the country’s youth and positively channeling their energies, through a wide range of opportunities for them to participate politically, socially and economically in Iraq’s development.

Recommendations

Mercy Corps’ findings imply that reforms that address underlying sources of grievances and improve citizens’ perceptions of their government will go a long way toward stabilization and reconciliation. What is critically needed is stronger, more accountable governance in Iraq brought about through government-civil society partnerships.

TO BUILD A STRONGER COOPERATIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT ON KEY POLICY ISSUES:

- The Abadi government and Iraq’s political parties should improve and formalize relations with civil society actors, including by the establishment of official, regular and inclusive civil society consultative processes that build on the advocacy council model established between civil society and provincial governments, while expanding civil society engagement from the grassroots to the capital.
- Donors should commit to multi-year investments in Iraqi civil society. Long-term stability in Iraq hinges on the development of a robust civil society that can partner with formal governments to improve services and enhance legitimacy.

TO IMPROVE THE CAPACITY OF LOCAL ACTORS TO REPRESENT CITIZENS’ CONCERNS AND PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN GOOD GOVERNANCE:

- Donors and INGOs should move beyond traditional capacity building approaches to engage civil society partners in actively informing programs and governance investments.
- Implementing Partners should facilitate stronger working relationships between youth demonstrators and civil society actors.

TO AVERT FUTURE CONFLICT AND RISING SECTARIAN TENSIONS IN THE COUNTRY:

- Donors should apply lessons learned from past “hearts and minds” initiatives efforts by ensuring governance investments are long-term, kept distinct from military operations, and informed by feedback mechanisms at the local, provincial and national government levels.
- The GOI should strengthen the Reconciliation Committee in the Prime Minister’s office.
- The GOI, supported by donors, should continue to improve its responsiveness and accountability in providing public goods effectively and equitably.

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