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The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Shaping Public Security Policies in Iraq from 2003 to 2023

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Since 2003, Iraq has been destabilized by successive conflicts and crises. In effect, the country became the site of a foreign-led nation-building project (Bronze), which catalyzed violent internal conflicts rooted in social, ethnic, political, and ideological divisions, ultimately resulting in widespread instability and insecurity. A key indicator of successful nation-building is the promotion of democracy and the establishment of democratic institutions. In this context, civil society has been analyzed through the lens of nation-building state theory. This article investigates the interrelation between civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the nation-building process in Iraq. The central premise of this study is that NGOs have been expanding and contributing to post-conflict reconstruction and governance in Iraq. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and integrating both desk-based and field research, the findings reveal that Iraqi society has been deeply affected by civil war, systematic human rights violations, sectarian and political conflicts, and recurring social crises. By leveraging political liberalization, the mobilization potential of social networks, and the legal infrastructure—specifically the Law of Associations—alongside the operation of political parties and other formal and informal institutions, civil society has begun to play a substantive role in shaping post-conflict nation-building. The civic engagement and social responsibility of individuals, as well as their contributions to stability and development, remain heterogeneous. This study seeks to analyze these dynamics within Iraqi society and assess their prospective influence.

Keywords: non-governmental organizations, public security, public policy

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1. Introduction

Iraq possesses a multifaceted social and political structure, which has grown increasingly complex in the aftermath of the United States military occupation. Numerous social, political, and strategic crises have revealed the deeply embedded challenges within this structure. Evidence suggests that Iraq's societal framework is inherently unstable, with persistent signs of conflict and confrontation among competing factions. The rivalry between regional actors and the involvement—or absence—of global powers have created fertile ground for the intensification of political

and social tensions. At present, state-building and large-scale conflicts constitute two of the most pressing challenges facing Iraq. Despite the formation of a democratic government following the fall of Saddam Hussein, the country has experienced a resurgence of long-standing conflicts.

This article seeks to identify civil society organizations operating in Iraq and analyze the influence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international governmental organizations (IGOs), and NGOs in the post-conflict reconstruction of the country. The significance of this study lies in its focus on the evolving role of civil society in the contemporary Iraqi context. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in generating social capital by fostering trust and cooperation among citizens, and they are instrumental in the broader nation-building process. One of the novel aspects of this research is its shift in analytical emphasis from the state to civil society, alongside a recognition of the changing socio-political landscape in Iraq. The central research question concerns the extent to which civil society and NGOs contribute to the process of state-building. The hypothesis underpinning this study posits that NGOs are expanding and playing an increasingly vital role in Iraq's post-conflict reconstruction. The research methodology adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, utilizing both secondary and field-based sources to explore the subject matter. To investigate the internal dynamics and historical developments in Iraq's political landscape, the study first defines core concepts such as civil society and the nation-state, then outlines the role of NGOs operating in Iraq, and finally assesses the involvement of international organizations in supporting civil society. Data collection for this research is based primarily on desk studies of civil society and NGOs in Iraq, compiled by the author.

2. Definition of Concepts

2.1. Civil Society

In this study, civil society refers to organizations, social groups, elite actors, and public sphere activists who predominantly operate within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) across political, economic, cultural, and social domains. The functions of civil society organizations evolve over time (Abdul-Jabbar Jassim, 2015; Abdullah, 2011), including needs assessment, participation in policy formulation and service delivery strategies, and oversight of governmental accountability (Hussein, 2012; Nour El-Din, 2010). Civil society is fundamentally concerned with safeguarding individual freedoms from oppression and violence, and with empowering people and groups to assert their identities within the bounds of legal frameworks (Al-Akra, 1993; Al-Bakri, 2011). It serves as a vital arena for the promotion of human rights both nationally and internationally.

Sethi (2007) characterizes civil society as a liberating force. Mansouri (2000) emphasizes its role in balancing state authority and regulating macroeconomic and social policy decisions, arguing that the state and civil society must function as partners rather than adversaries (Nour El-Din, 2010).

2.2. Government–Nation Building

Nation-building is a logical process underpinned by the consolidation of power, territorial integration, and political, economic, and social stability (Abdul-Jabbar Jassim, 2015; Abdullah, 2011). It represents a convergence between the modern state and national identity. In contrast, state-building refers specifically to the establishment and institutionalization of the judiciary, executive, military, and legislative bodies (Al-Kubaisi, 1999; Al-Rawi, 2009). While the concepts of the state and the nation are distinct, they remain interdependent in both theory and practice.

3. Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Organizations in Iraq

The majority of independent civil society organizations in Iraq are active in humanitarian domains. A young and engaged population, combined with a prevailing sense of civic responsibility, has spurred increased participation in volunteer activities, thereby compensating for deficits in state governance. Field data collected for this study focus on Dhi Qar Governorate, centered in the city of Nasiriyah in southern Iraq. With a population exceeding two million, the governorate comprises eight administrative districts and possesses a rich cultural legacy dating back to ancient Ur and Sumer. The region is marked by a confluence of urban, rural, and marshland cultures.

Civil society organizations in Dhi Qar exhibit characteristics similar to those found in other Iraqi governorates. This governorate was selected purposively to represent a microcosm of civil society activity in Iraq more broadly. The organizations included in this study were selected based on their demonstrable engagement and official status; these are not merely nominal entities but have verifiable addresses, digital footprints, and active participation in social media networks, particularly Facebook. Facebook serves as a critical platform for Iraqi civil society engagement. While data from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior suggests a significantly higher number of such organizations, the statistics presented here are derived from the author's field research and should be regarded as non-official.

3.1. Charitable and Supportive Institutions

Charitable organizations and NGOs represent two primary forms of grassroots civil society engagement. While charitable organizations focus on relief efforts, NGOs engage more systematically in sustainable development and empowerment initiatives for marginalized populations. These organizations leverage public donations and financial resources to establish infrastructure, provide vocational training, create employment opportunities, foster cultural growth, and strengthen both individual and collective identity. This section outlines several such organizations operating in Dhi Qar Governorate, with an emphasis on institutions engaged in economic empowerment, which will be discussed in further detail in the subsequent section.

3.2. Organizations with Environmental Functions

These organizations aim to mobilize local communities, particularly residents of the wetlands in Dhi Qar Governorate, to engage in environmental protection efforts, especially in ecologically significant areas. Their activities focus on the sustainable management and conservation of biodiversity, with an emphasis on the participation of local beneficiaries.

The Jabayesh Indigenous Tourism Organization consists of 10,000 members working to develop eco-tourism and protect the wetland environment. It addresses the challenges of climate change, global warming, and drought, and explores strategies to mitigate their impact. The organization supports the conservation of native bird species and the Iraqi Marshlands Museum and organizes conferences involving scholars and notable figures.

Civil society activists have collaborated with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to clean the Euphrates River and combat water pollution. This partnership represents one of the organization's ongoing initiatives.

The Nasiriyah Marshlands Migratory Bird Conservation Society, also comprising 10,000 members, monitors environmental conditions in the marshes and raises awareness of drought risks. It oversees migratory bird patterns, coordinates with local law enforcement to regulate hunting, and works to prevent the extinction of bird species, all while preserving the aesthetic and ecological value of the region.

The White Hands Organization for Community Development (also known as White Hands for Children) organizes periodic clean-up campaigns in coordination with security forces to promote environmental awareness and enhance the city's appearance.

The Tima Center supports Iraqi families in improving their residential environments and fighting desertification by implementing sustainable environmental projects. In addition to charitable activities, it contributes to urban beautification through the restoration of industrial zones, the development of parks and green spaces, the provision of potable water to underserved areas, and public education on drought and climate change.

3.3. Organizations with Educational, Research, and Academic Functions

These organizations are dedicated to educating active citizens, organizing workshops and training programs in civic activism, and enhancing essential skills in fields such as media, human rights, and academic disciplines.

The Rodan Institute for Education and Human Rights and the Anhar Institute for Education and Human Rights focus on disseminating knowledge about human rights through short educational videos and visual media. They also offer skills training tailored to labor market demands.

The Pajhwok Institute for Student Education and the Sada Institute for Student Education support academic advancement in various disciplines. These institutes maintain partnerships with the Iraqi Academics

Association, the Education and Training Authority, and other academic institutions. Their activities include disseminating exam-related information and advocating for educational equity.

The Amarji Center for Development and Training leverages a broad digital membership network and integrates new technologies and artificial intelligence to enhance virtual civic engagement. It delivers recurring online courses in subjects such as Python, data analysis, programming, personal branding, Excel, and LinkedIn.

The Al-Safa Institute for Community Development (also referred to as the Al-Safa Foundation for Community Development) operates educational institutions offering curricula in both traditional academic subjects and religious education, including Shafi'i jurisprudence and Sufism. It also provides educational and rehabilitation services for orphans, aiming to secure their future development.

The Dhi Qar Center for Civil Development (or Dhi Qar Forum for Civil Development) operates in schools and trains students designated as "Human Rights Friends" to promote awareness of human rights in the broader community.

The Edraak Organization for Human Development believes that Iraq's developmental challenges require the intellectual and analytical engagement of youth. It organizes regular competitions in writing, analysis, and journalism across 34 categories for adolescents and young adults, offering incentive-based awards.

3.4. Organizations with Economic and Social Empowerment Functions

Economic and social entrepreneurship and the creation of added value are among the key strategies these organizations employ to ensure the sustainability of civil society and promote societal independence. They provide infrastructure and resources to enhance the self-sufficiency of vulnerable populations.

The Iraqi Family Support and Development Association (IFADA), active in nine provinces since 2004, operates under the motto "Together we build a civilized Iraqi civil society." The organization promotes peaceful coexistence, combats violence in all forms, and empowers youth and women by conducting training workshops and advocating for gender equality.

The Al-Hadi Organization for Widows and Orphans, in addition to food and aid distribution, engages in housing

development and supports small-scale entrepreneurship.

The Solidarity Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Orphans, originally founded in Iran in 1990 with the support of Sheikh Mohammad Baqer Nasiri, has assisted hundreds of Iraqi orphans in Qom and Dezful. Since 2003, it has expanded operations and currently provides shelter to 700 orphans.

The Association for Youth Capacity Development (ALT) is an active network that facilitates youth engagement in economic ventures, investment, and entrepreneurship.

The Saba Center for Humanitarian Studies and Development (also known as the Saba Center for Studies and Printing) focuses exclusively on women and is committed to comprehensive human development across Iraq. It promotes empowerment, human rights, peacebuilding, reconciliation, and the inclusion of women, girls, and individuals with disabilities.

The Kholoud Organization for Development, with 4,000 members, works to combat violence against women, support female heads of households in achieving economic success, and promote women's participation in political leadership. It also addresses health, welfare, and other social issues.

The Women's Companionship Association, also referred to as the Women's Solidarity Association, emphasizes the role of women in national development. It engages in political education through weekly publications and delivers economic empowerment training through frequent workshops targeted at women.

3.5. Non-Governmental Organizations in the Social Fields of Health and Human Rights

These organizations pursue targeted social objectives by advocating for legal reform, proposing policy recommendations, and supporting vulnerable groups—particularly women and children—through engagement with legal institutions and public policy frameworks.

Key organizations include the Thalassemia Relief Organization, Short Women's Movement, Iraqi Women's Rehabilitation Center, Association for the Deaf and Mute, and the Mother and Child Development Organization.

Additional organizations include the Al-Insaniya Organization (Humanitarian Organization for Mother and Child Development), the Diabetes Association in Dhi Qar, the Cerebral Palsy Children's Foundation, the Al-Ain Foundation for Social Care, the Biladi Foundation for

Relief and Development, and the Human Rights Organization for Communication and Fraternity. These entities collectively include approximately 5,000 members and receive advisory support from UNICEF. Their areas of activity extend beyond human rights and child protection to include climate change advocacy, the provision of potable water in disadvantaged areas, and addressing displacement caused by drought. They also conduct psychological workshops on digital harassment prevention, particularly targeting students and youth, and maintain active collaboration with the Iraqi Ministry of Education.

The Al-Khamael Foundation for Development and Combating Violence Against Women (Musa Al-Khamael Foundation), with a membership of 2,000, implements advocacy campaigns on public policy, environmental protection, and women's rights.

The Basma Organization for Support and Development, under the Basma Relief and Development System, supports children's education through its "I Will Not Leave School" campaign. It also addresses maternal illiteracy, administers a school feeding program, and provides aid to refugees displaced by ISIS-related violence, in addition to other charitable services.

The Rose Path Humanitarian Organization (RTHO), in partnership with the Arts and Drama Association in Iraq and in collaboration with educators and writers, fosters the creative development of children. It prioritizes drug prevention in schools and educational institutions.

The Impact for Growth Center works to enhance public awareness of democratic rights and advocates for legal protections related to food security, healthcare, education, employment, and environmental sustainability.

The Baraem Humanitarian Organization is a charitable entity that provides rapid emergency relief in the event of natural disasters and other crises. It operates a widespread volunteer network that addresses poverty alleviation, food security, women's education, and various other social and health concerns.

3.6. Non-Governmental Organizations in the Cultural, Religious, Artistic, and Sports Fields for Youth

These organizations seek to raise public awareness and education, engage relevant institutions and social actors, and contribute to the prevention of social harm and criminal behavior. In the context of Iraq and other Islamic societies, cultural activities are often intertwined with religious and political dynamics. Consequently, it is difficult to clearly separate cultural endeavors from other societal domains. Within the geographic scope of Dhi Qar Governorate, several organizations have emerged as key actors in these intersecting fields.

The Cultural State Organization, with over 7,000 members, is a prominent cultural institution that promotes tolerance and humanitarian values grounded in Shi'a traditions. Its activities significantly contribute to peaceful grassroots-driven state-building initiatives. Other notable organizations in this category include the Quranic Gathering in Dhi Qar, the Dar al-Wafa Quranic Society, the Popular Poets Association, the Nasserite Poetry Association, and the Elite Organization for Cultural Development.

Additional institutions involved in cultural development include the Arab Association for Literature and Culture, the Photography Forum, the Photography Center for the Arts, the Football Teams Association, the Marshlands Cultural Center, the Roots Cultural Center, the Al-Hafeez Institute for Culture and Media, and the Arab Marshlands Organization for Cultural Development.

3.7. Non-Governmental Organizations in the Political Sphere

Non-governmental organizations, while not integrated into the formal governmental structure, serve as critical intermediaries between citizens and state institutions. Many of the previously mentioned organizations are de facto political actors due to their engagement with socially and politically charged issues. Some are directly involved in electoral activities and exert influence over political discourse and party dynamics.

The Southern Center for Strategic Studies, established in 2006, operates five active committees focusing on legal, research, monitoring, and media work. It plays an important role in disseminating accurate information, addressing civil society concerns, and monitoring media content to counteract misinformation and bias.

The Islamic Solidarity Society is a broad-based grassroots organization encompassing activities in religion, education, women's affairs, health, sports, politics, and research. It serves as a platform for civic and religious engagement throughout the province.

The Civilizations Dialogue for Development Organization fosters political dialogue through collaboration with

various institutions and associations. It contributes significantly to electoral participation and coalition-building, while also supporting human rights defenders.

The Jusoor Youth Organization is dedicated to promoting positive citizenship and countering radicalization among youth. It strengthens civil society by building intercommunal networks and encouraging inclusive engagement.

The Speicher Victims Organization emerged in response to the 2014 Speicher Air Base massacre, in which 1,700 Iraqi military cadets were executed by ISIS. This organization advocates for international legal recognition of the atrocity and calls for prosecution through the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and global legal institutions.

The Al-Qithara Institute for Journalism and Media Development, with 440 active members, monitors media performance and promotes democratic values and freedom of expression. Its objectives include exposing constitutional violations, supporting human rights, articulating democratic interpretations of freedom, and confronting ethnically and tribally biased media outlets.

The Nour Al-Aindia Youth Organization, in collaboration with the International Commission on Missing Persons and through civil society networks and media outreach, works to locate missing individuals. These include victims of the Ba'ath regime and others unaccounted for during the current political period, including political figures.

The Southern Youth Association (SHAAB), with a membership of 16,000, promotes youth participation in monitoring legal violations and electoral irregularities. It maintains consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and advocates for peace as a core principle.

The Manahil Human Rights Organization monitors human rights violations and offers political and civil support to NGOs across Iraq.

The Habbou Youth Students Association, with 3,700 members, focuses on human rights, anti-corruption efforts, and government transparency, particularly in the management of oil and industrial revenues. It conducts political debates, educational workshops, and charitable initiatives such as school renovations.

The Tamkeen Center for Participation and Equality is focused on empowering women in political processes, including elections and executive leadership. It promotes gender equality in education, supports women's representation in the Iraqi Council of Representatives, and emphasizes the political and cultural roles of women in provincial and local councils. The center operates in affiliation with the Islah Party, reflecting its ideological orientation.

4. International Organizations' Support for Civil Society Organizations in Iraq

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) serves as the principal and most influential organization supporting civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq. According to quarterly reports on its activities, USAID allocates approximately $3 billion annually to support CSOs in Iraq, reaching an estimated 1.6 million beneficiaries and distributing around $880 million across various sectors.

In the immediate aftermath of the Ba'ath regime's collapse, Iraqi society was subject to externally driven democratization efforts. These initiatives, often perceived as imposed, aligned with Johann Hippler's classification of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Such organizations typically possess limited grassroots participation but are characterized by strong institutional capacity and external backing.

Organizations with formal administrative structures, clearly defined operational goals, recognized legal status, and both domestic and international presence demonstrate higher effectiveness. These INGOs have gradually transitioned from mere support roles to more empowering strategies that enhance the autonomy and agency of target populations.

5. Iraqi Civil Society and the Nation-State Building Process

Comparative studies of crisis-affected regions reveal that the dissolution of state structures does not result in a political or administrative vacuum. Instead, alternative mechanisms—ranging from the revival of traditional structures to the emergence of local collectives and NGOs—take on political and administrative roles to address urgent communal needs.

Hippler emphasizes that NGOs in conflict-prone environments serve as essential agents of nation-building. The United Nations and other regional and governmental institutions contribute significantly to

establishing flexible reconstruction frameworks, building educational infrastructure, facilitating transitional justice, assisting marginalized populations, and promoting democratic governance. Within this context, NGOs are seen as instruments for compensating for dysfunctional state structures and advancing the nation-building process.

NGOs are often credited with critical roles in post-conflict scenarios—such as delivering humanitarian assistance and reducing conflict risks—yet their neutrality is frequently scrutinized. In Iraq, coalition forces have leveraged NGOs and media narratives to construct a favorable image of military intervention. Concurrently, NGOs have sometimes aligned with intelligence and security objectives, including through food aid programs that support broader military strategies (Al-Din, 2001; Al-Fahdawi, 2001). From Hippler's perspective, in addition to physical infrastructure, the presence of foreign-supported NGOs is vital to modernization and state reconstruction efforts. The core characteristics of civil society organizations include:

1. Voluntary and spontaneous individual participation, setting them apart from other social entities;
2. Institutional structure and order, which allow individuals to join by choice;
3. Organizational independence from the state;
4. Foundational values centered on peace, freedom, equality, and ethical integrity (Al-Naimi, 2013; Al-Rawi, 2009).

Kerr and Weiss (Al-Fahdawi, 2001) outline three typologies of NGO–state relations:

First, grassroots NGOs, typically registered and monitored by state authorities in developing countries, primarily seek international funding.

Second, semi-NGOs, more common in developed countries, receive financial support from the national budget.

Third, fully independent NGOs, funded by foreign sources and international aid, maintain greater autonomy.

Iraq exhibits legal and institutional conditions conducive to the operation of all three NGO models, with a notable rise in grassroots organizations. According to the Iraqi Council of Representatives and the Council of Ministers—and based on Article 61, Paragraph 1, and Article 73, Paragraph 3 of the Iraqi Constitution—the operation of NGOs is governed by specific legislative parameters.

Under this legal framework, a non-governmental organization is defined as a group of natural or legal persons registered in accordance with Iraqi law to pursue non-profit objectives. A foreign NGO refers to an organization legally established under the jurisdiction of a foreign state. NGO networks, composed of multiple NGOs each holding independent legal status, may also register under this law.

Article 2 of the NGO Law outlines key objectives: strengthening civil society, supporting organizational development, preserving institutional independence, expanding citizens' freedom to establish or join NGOs, and creating a centralized registration authority for both Iraqi and foreign organizations. In return, NGOs are expected to operate in accordance with peaceful and democratic principles. The law permits the establishment of NGOs by any Iraqi citizen or resident. Law No. 12 of 2010, enacted by the Iraqi Presidency Council, consists of 10 chapters and 36 articles and grants substantial freedom of operation while ensuring accountability.

6. Conclusion

The *National Project for Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence*—a program designed to promote national dialogue, human rights, social harmony, and ethnic reconciliation—has long been implemented to decentralize power and strengthen civil society in Iraq's political, cultural, and social spheres. The development of NGOs in Iraq has become integral to achieving political objectives such as reducing centralized state control, promoting democratic governance, mitigating violence, and enhancing civic participation.

Following 2003, political parties with established external roots and organizational structures gained influence within Iraq. However, these parties failed to represent the broader population. Disillusioned by political factions and influenced by international encouragement, many Iraqis increasingly turned to NGOs as the most accessible platform for democratic engagement. Civil society—encompassing cultural, professional, social, and religious associations—has gradually acquired the capacity to constrain and influence state power. Unlike newly formed

organizations, these parties often relied on their anti-Ba'athist credentials and accumulated social capital. Nevertheless, diverse and dedicated civil society groups have, in line with Tocqueville's theory, come to serve as the "independent eye" of society and as partial guarantors of freedom and pluralism within the democratic process. Their influence on the Iraqi legislature and policymaking bodies is now significant and measurable.

Simultaneously, the expansion of globalization and the diminishing capacity of national governments to address global challenges—such as environmental degradation, peace-building, poverty alleviation, and humanitarian crises—have increased the relevance and operational necessity of civil society organizations. Over the past two decades, their presence and influence in Iraq's socio-political landscape have become increasingly apparent.

Nevertheless, several structural and cultural challenges continue to hinder the full development of civil society in Iraq. These include limited public awareness—particularly among traditional sectors—regarding the role of NGOs, insufficient government trust in these organizations, internal organizational weaknesses, lack of strategic planning, minimal collective mobilization, and the absence of comprehensive national data on civil society needs. Additionally, Iraq's entrenched tribal and patriarchal structures, coupled with a political culture that often favors authoritarianism, present serious obstacles to the institutionalization of democratic norms. Despite ongoing efforts to advance democratic principles and the rule of law, Iraq's political elite lack substantial experience in engaging with democratic institutions and often exhibit authoritarian tendencies, with a propensity to centralize power. Overcoming these issues requires a transformative shift in the political consciousness of both individuals and dominant religious institutions, which must be driven by deeper cultural, economic, and societal change.

Rather than emulating Western liberal values—which may risk further alienating domestic constituencies—efforts at cultural modernization should draw upon deeply rooted religious, ideological, and national values. Such values include justice, cooperation, and equality from religious teachings; national unity and mutual understanding; tolerance and forgiveness; acceptance of pluralism; and diversity in political and social discourse. Emphasizing national consensus, trusted political leadership, and free elections could offer a culturally congruent path toward democratization and societal integration in Iraq.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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