

Iraq Program Summary

Since the summer of 2003, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has conducted a multifaceted program in Iraq, working with political parties and candidates, indigenous civil society groups and sitting government officials to promote democratic governance. IRI programs in Iraq have ranged from election training for candidates running for public office to civil society advocacy campaign and voter awareness television shows produced by IRI's state-of-the-art Media Center.

Political Party Development

Since late 2003, IRI's political party work has concentrated on promoting internal democracy, encouraging political platforms based on issues rather than sect or ethnicity and training candidates to compete effectively in free and fair elections. IRI works with a large number of Iraqi political parties on these issues, including groups representing every cross-section of Iraqi society. In 2009 and early 2010, the majority of IRI's efforts in this field were devoted to campaign training around regional and national elections. In advance of the March 2010 parliamentary elections, IRI trained more than 2,000 candidates running for office, who were in turn twice as likely to win seats as the national average.

In 2011, IRI political parties work has turned to the fundamentals of internal democracy and accountability. Iraqi parties are using IRI training materials to internally train the next generation of party agents. IRI's internal public opinion research team continues to conduct polls testing public attitudes towards the political process and tracking the effectiveness of government initiatives to meet citizen needs.

Democratic Governance

Effective governance will be a test of the resiliency of Iraq's democracy. With the improvements in security, recent IRI poll data shows that more Iraqis are now concerned with economic and service issues than with security. In order for Iraq's democratic system to succeed, all levels of Iraq's government must prove themselves accountable and responsive to citizen needs.

At the local level, IRI conducts ongoing training and consultations for each of Iraq's provincial councils, tailored for the specific needs of each council. For example, in Anbar IRI helped the provincial council share ideas for developing the Akkaz gas fields. In Ninawa province, IRI conducted conflict management and coalition-building work between estranged Sunni Arab and Kurdish factions within the provincial council. Subnational officials are invited regularly to IRI-sponsored town hall meetings and policy forums to hear directly from constituents and publically discuss their work. IRI's many forums and town hall meetings have altered Iraq's local political landscape, shedding light on the normally closed, locked doors of Iraqi politics and facilitating the first real public discourse on Iraq's most pressing issues.

Supplementing its work with the provincial councils, IRI assists subnational elected bodies with the establishment of small research directorates modeled on the U.S. Congressional Research Service. IRI pioneered this work in Baghdad with the national Council of Representatives, and in 2010 launched an effort to replicate this successful work at the local level.

Tying together much of IRI's democratic governance work, indigenous Iraqi think tanks are supported in providing outside voices in the public policy debate. Over the past several years, IRI-think tank partners have held conferences in Baghdad bringing together both academic and political perspectives and have gained recognition with international think tanks for their academic work. Recently, IRI partner the Iraqi Institute for Economic

Reform, a respected voice on government reform, used IRI training to conduct an independent assessment of the Basra provincial council and government contracting practices.

Civil Society Initiatives

In order to ensure the stability of Iraq's democracy, citizens must be prepared, encouraged and empowered to take part in the process of self-governance. IRI has concentrated substantial resources to help promote advocacy among the diverse civic organizations that represent the people outside the halls of government.

IRI has supported efforts to promote the role of women, youth and minorities in public and political life since 2004, through events which bring together civic activists, members of provincial councils, officials from the executive branch and members of Iraq's parliament. The advocates IRI supports strive to raise public awareness among the government and the general population about the rights of these groups and pressure the Iraqi government to ensure legislative conformity with international human rights standards.

One demonstration of the impact of IRI-supported civil society is the creation of the Kurdistan Youth Future Fund. For more than two years the Erbil-based Aynda Center for Youth Issues advocated for the youth-oriented business microloan fund which the Kurdistan Regional Parliament approved in April 2011.

The Aynda Center also led the effort to reform the Kurdistan region's law governing nongovernmental organizations. A successful 2009 campaign reduced the age required to run for office from 30 to 25. Today, four percent of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament is under the age of 30, and the Aynda Center has leveraged its success to pursue new youth programs.

In addition to public awareness campaigns, IRI uses its broad network of civil society partners to conduct voter education prior to elections. In advance of the March 2010 council of representatives elections, IRI distributed 4.2 million mock ballots through its civil society network, and in the five provinces most heavily targeted with this educational material, voter turnout was five percent higher than the national average.

