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The Landscape of Civil Society in Iraq

The Relationship of CSOs with Government, Religious, and Tribal Institutions at the Sub-State Level

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1 Introduction

Many scholars, policymakers, and observers view civil society as a force to be reckoned with in the political arena. Although they differ on what its exact function is and whether it challenges the political status quo or entrenches it, they nevertheless keep an eye on it, aware of its potential. This is the case globally with hundreds of reports and articles written to examine the tenuous link between civil society and political and economic outcomes in places ranging from China to the United States, Brazil, Spain, Palestine and Lebanon.¹ Iraq is no exception, particularly as anti-government protests swept across the nation in late 2019, highlighting the salience of activism and civil society organizations.

The challenge with Iraq has been to build a democracy while keeping the political class in check, a task that, in theory, falls to civil society. This, of course, is difficult in Iraq's case where civil society was nearly non-existent under the Ba'ath dictatorship.² Like the democratization project in Iraq, civil society has sprung with little foundation, sometimes inorganically, and has had to adapt to unprecedented circumstances.

In this rapidly changing context, many international organizations, donors, and local philanthropists have attempted to deliver support to Iraqi civil society, but with little tools available to understand its landscape, its function, and its needs. Similarly, many researchers have been interested in its role in society but have also approached it through the limited lens of the most visible organizations. Therefore, most analyses of civil society zeroes in on a handful of organizations and examines their relationship with the state and with society. This approach is valuable as these organizations comprise the most active and politically savvy organizations in the country. However, what is missing in both the study of civil society and in its support is a bird's eye view of Iraqi civil society.

To remedy this and to serve as a base for future research, this report delivers a macro-level analysis of civil society in Iraq, analysing over 4000 organizations across 15 of Iraq's 18 governorates (Kurdistan Region of Iraq excluded), with interviews and surveys. 100 organizations were interviewed, in addition to the NGO Directorate³, the governmental office tasked with registering organizations and nearly 200 organizations surveyed. The report has three objectives: first, to map out civil society organizations across Iraq, their function, their location, and their membership structure. Second, to assess the relationship between civil society and the state beyond the protestor/politician divide and examine more deeply intrinsic ties to power and politics, including public sector

1 Ekiert, G., & Kubik, J. (2010). Rebellious civil society: Popular protest and democratic consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993. In *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland, 1989-1993*; Encarnación, O. G. (2003). The Myth of Civil Society. In *The Myth of Civil Society*; Richter, J., & Hatch, W. F. (2013). Organizing Civil Society in Russia and China: A Comparative Approach. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 26(4); Schwartz, F. J., & Pharr, S. J. (2013). The state of civil society in Japan. In *The State of Civil Society in Japan*; Waisman, C. H., Feinberg, R., & Zamosc, L. (2006). Introduction: Civil Society and Democracy: The Latin American Case. In *Civil Society and Democracy in Latin America*. Palgrave Macmillan US; Wiktorowicz, Q. (2000). Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan. *Comparative Politics*, 33(1).

2 Davis, Eric "The Historical Genesis of the Public Sphere in Iraq, 1900-1963: Implications for Building Democracy in the Post-Ba'thist Era," in *Publics, Politics, and Participation: Locating the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Seteney Shami (New York: Social Science Research Council, 2009), 385-427.

3 The author and research team are grateful to the NGO directorate for their support in providing data as well as their willingness to be interviewed.

employment. Finally, this report assesses the relationship between civil society and the public, including the degree to which civil society is involved in supporting (directly or indirectly) protest behaviour, as well as the degree to which the views of leaders of civil society organizations are representative of the overall Iraqi public.

The report is organized at the governorate-level, providing answers to the three main questions in each of the 15 governorates studied: what does civil society look like in this governorate? What is civil society's relationship with the local and federal government? What is civil society's relationship with the public? In each section, it pulls evidence from the NGO Directorate, from a survey, and from interviews.

Before providing this governorate-level analysis, the report begins with a methodological note, describing the data collection process. Then, it introduces civil society in Iraq more broadly. Following this is the governorate-level analysis. The report concludes with a synthesis of the findings.

This report is meant to showcase Iraq's diversity, not just religiously and ethnically, but also geographically with how different governorates operate. At the sub-national level, some civil societies are closer to the federal government, while others are closer to their local government, others are affected by religious establishments while others are affected by tribal presence. Of course, the disputed governorates have their own set of issues to deal with. This report shows how diverse and large Iraq's CSO scene is and how it cannot be painted with broad brushstrokes. The international donor community and researchers have tended to view civil society as the most active and visible organizations and the political elite – following the October Protest movement- became sceptical of civil society all together.

Iraq is more complicated than the assumption that a Shi'a governorate will have a good relationship with the federal government or that a homogenous governorate will have good relations with their local government. This report shows that we have to take into consideration local political dynamics, tribes, and religious actors who wield different degrees of power in different communities. This report is meant to show the difficulties of trying to navigate Iraqi civil society. It paves the way for further sub-national research and argues for more complexity in how we write, speak, and engage with civil society.

2 Methodological Note

2.1 Security Environment Sensitivities

The goal of this report was to interview or survey representatives of as many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as possible within Iraq (excluding the Kurdistan Region of Iraq)⁴ and to collect data on four key issues: internal organization and financing, nature of work and programming, relationship with the local and federal governments, and views towards the October 2019 protests. The interview and survey guides were designed based on previous fieldwork experience conducted between 2016 and 2017 in south and south-central Iraq, where the author examined the relationship between democratization and civil society.⁵ However, after a brief piloting period of one week in Baghdad and Babil governorates, it became clear that the political atmosphere in Iraq was tense and that civil society activists could no longer speak as freely as they had in the past. Considering this, the interview guide and survey questions were altered to focus most on organization and programming, and less so on political views and protest behavior.

Typically, researchers do not describe the full process of formulating interview/survey questions. However, in this case, the need to re-formulate questions to adapt to a new political reality is an important finding in of itself. Across multiple research projects conducted in Iraq between 2013 and the present, I have found that the space for civil society and for freedom of speech has shrunk.⁶ In the past, NGOs were willing to answer any question regarding

⁴ The governorates of the KRI were excluded from the analysis because NGOs operating in the KRI operate under a different set of regulations and under the surveillance of the Kurdistan Regional Government, rather than the federal government in Baghdad.

⁵ Marsin Alshamary, "Postwar development of civil society in Iraq's mid-Euphrates region" *The Brookings Institution*, January 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/postwar-development-of-civil-society-in-iraqs-mid-euphrates-region/>.

⁶ Foltyn, Simona, "Iraq's Prime Minister is Silencing Human Rights Advocates," *Foreign Policy*, June 2, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/02/iraqs-prime-minister-is-silencing-human-rights-advocates/>.

their views towards politics and the state. In the past, the response rate for NGOs was high and only ghost organizations – those registered but not operative – were difficult to interview. During this round of fieldwork, the enumerators were confronted with wary individuals who presented many questions before accepting – or, frequently declining – the interview. Over the course of the interview, many individuals would opt out of certain questions (the most common question that was left unanswered concerned their views towards the protest movement). And, in some instances, once an interview had been concluded, individuals would change their mind, revoke their consent, and ask that the entire interview be erased. In this environment, the research team – two Iraqi political scientists – was trained to repeatedly reassure respondents of their rights and to be proactive in ending interviews if the respondent was uncomfortable. And, as a form of adaptation, the research team began to give individuals the option of a phone interview or an anonymized survey via Google Forms, which many preferred.

I provide these details to illustrate both the limitations of the data, as well as the changed research environment in Iraq. With regards to the former, the sample interviewed is a biased sample in that it reflects individuals who were willing to participate in an interview, despite the political environment. This is a bias which exists in most research and does not invalidate the overall contribution of this report, which is to shed light on lesser-known organizations across Iraq.

With regards to the latter, many reports and analyses have already highlighted that the security environment for activists has deteriorated in the last three years, following the 2019 October Protest Movement. During the protest movement, protestors faced indiscriminate violence and, by some accounts, nearly 500 individuals were killed.⁷ Since the protests, activists have been steadily targeted for intimidation, kidnapping and even assassinations. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), there were 48 incidents of attempted or completed targeted killings of activists between 1 October 2019 and 15 May 2021.⁸ Despite mounting public pressure for justice and accountability, those behind the violence have been unidentified and unpunished by the state. Therefore, it is unsurprising that civil society activists – even those who operate non-politicized organizations – are wary of attracting attention to themselves. The NGO Directorate, too, has become more protective of the data and privacy of civil society organizations since the 2019 protest movement and is cognizant of the environment in which they operate.⁹

Out of an abundance of caution, this report does not mention any organization by name, even those who granted permission or requested they be named for visibility.

2.2 The Data

This report analyzes several data-sources, including data provided by the NGO Directorate detailing the number of organizations registered across different governorates, their stated missions, and years of operation. Based on this and relying on social media accounts of organizations for contact information, the research team then conducted 100 interviews with members of NGOs, as well as circulated a survey among organizations, soliciting a total of 195 responses.

The following tables illustrate first: the type of registered NGOs across the combined 15 governorates.¹⁰ During registration, each organization is required to select one specialization (or otherwise indicate “multiple”), meaning that there is one data point for each organization. In many cases, the NGO Directorate made the final designation of specialization where multiple specializations were listed, after reviewing the documents submitted.

Secondly, figure 2 illustrates the types of specializations that surveyed NGOs reported, which oftentimes included multiple fields, meaning that there are multiple data points for each organization. The side-by-side display of

⁷ UNAMI, “Human Rights Violations and Abuses in the Context of Demonstrations in Iraq,” 27 August 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/human-rights-violations-and-abuses-context-demonstrations-iraq-october-2019-april-2020>.

⁸ UNAMI, “Update on Demonstrations in Iraq: Accountability for Human Rights Violations and Abuses by Unidentified Armed Elements,” May 2021. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNAMI_Report_Accountability_for_Human_Rights_Violations_and_Abuses_300521.pdf.

⁹ Author interview with NGO Directorate official, Baghdad, March 2021.

¹⁰ This report focuses on: Anbar, Babil, Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, Diyala, Karbala, Kirkuk, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Ninewa, Qadisiyah, Salahaddin and Wasit.

these figures reinforces the idea that most organizations have multiple specializations (there are common specialization pairings) and that the landscape of *active* organizations does not mirror the landscape of the registered ones. In other words, figure 2 gives a clearer idea of the specializations of NGOs that are active and willing to engage. For example, some categories are more common in terms of both registration and activity, such as: sustainable development, humanitarian aid, culture, children and orphans, education, and relief. Interestingly, human rights as a category is prominent in the government database but almost absent in the survey, which can be interpreted in one of two ways: either many ghost organizations register as human rights organizations or many human rights organizations refuse to be interviewed. According to an organization in Qadisiyah that was registered as a human rights organization, the designation was dictated by the local representative of the NGO Directorate to the mid-Euphrates, despite the organization's request to be listed under "sustainable development".¹¹

Unfortunately, it is impossible to detangle these potential explanations. In the reverse, more surveyed organizations focus on women's affairs than those listed in the government dataset. This finding is an interesting launching point for research focusing on women's rights in Iraq.

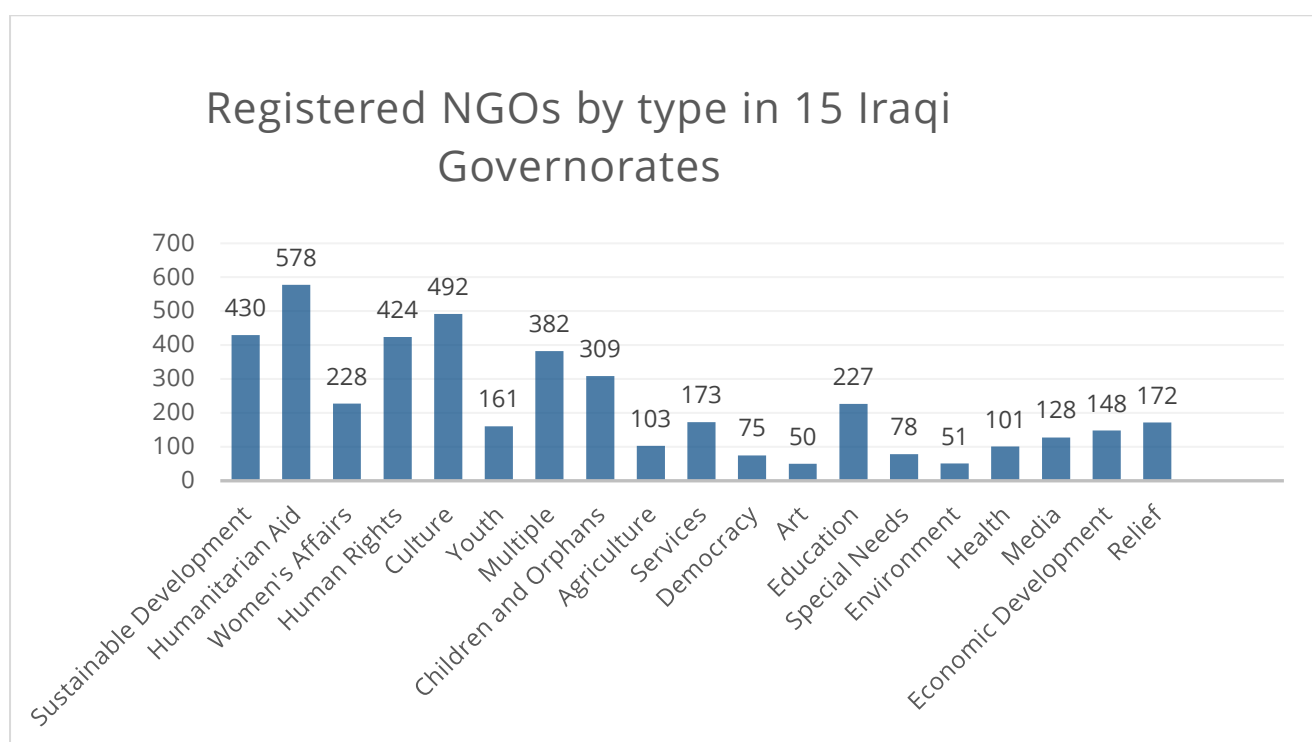


Figure 1

In the figure above, the most registered organizations operate in sustainable development, humanitarian aid, human rights, and culture. The figure below shows that the research team spoke to organizations specializing in sustainable development, humanitarian aid, women's affairs, culture, and children and orphans. As described in the section above, the selection criteria for interviews and surveys was biased by many external factors, but nevertheless the difference between the registered and the surveyed reflects important preliminary findings, which can be used as launching points for more directed research projects. Ultimately, the goal of this project is to provide a layout of the NGO space in Iraq as a foundation for other projects, both those launched by both researchers to better understand civil society and those launched by international organizations to support civil society.

Many organizations in Iraq are devoted to sustainable development, which is surprising in an environment in which sustainable practices are rarely mentioned or discussed among the public. Of course, this is understandable given the considerable challenges Iraq faces in other sectors (overcoming poverty and unemployment, reconstruction, empowering women, etc.). However, from the interviews and surveys, organizations dedicated to sustainable

¹¹ Author interview with founder of a human rights organization in Diwaniya, Qadisiyah. February 2022. Baghdad, Iraq.

development tend to engage in activities of empowerment and capacity-building. In many instances, the lines are blurred between sustainable development and humanitarian aid. In other words, it may simply be a definitional issue and future research can examine how environmental groups, for example, define sustainable development differently.

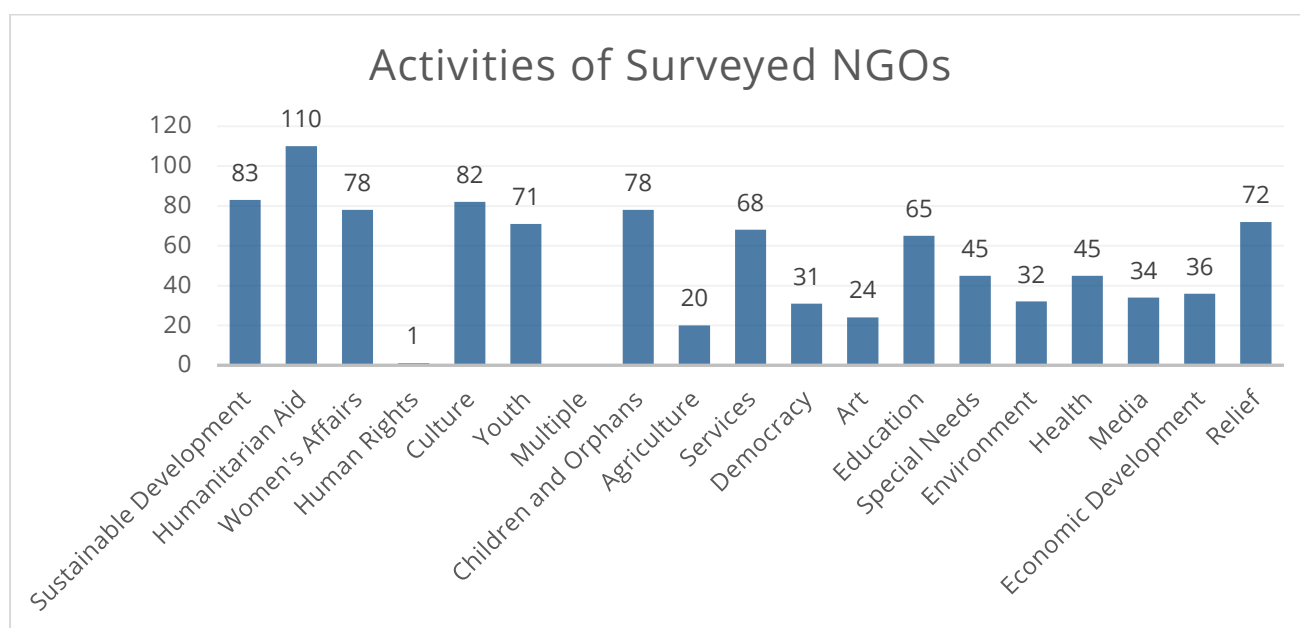


Figure 1

Finally, figure 3 describes how many organisations are registered in each of the 15 governorates.

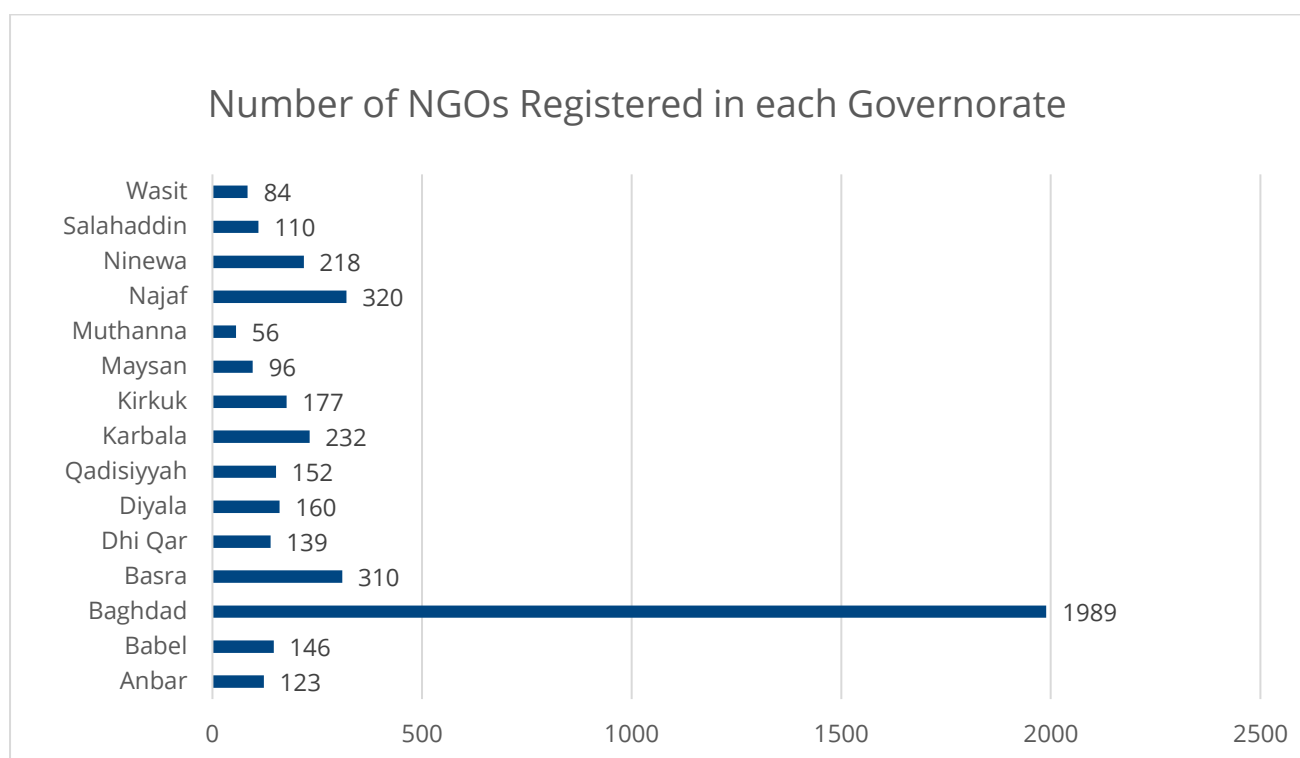


Figure 3

In the next section, I describe civil society groups in each of these governorates in detail, drawing on the interviews and surveys conducted.

3 The Governorates

3.1 Anbar

Anbar is Iraq's westernmost governorate, bordering Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. Its capital is Ramadi, but it has other prominent cities, like Fallujah and Al-Qaim. Its internal borders extend from Ninewa, Salahaddin and Baghdad to Babil, Karbala, and Najaf, though much of that land is uninhabited desert. Anbar's population is nearly two million and its residents are predominantly Sunni Arabs. Its local economy is fueled by commerce and agriculture. Like many other areas in Iraq, tribes remain influential societal actors in the governorate, providing adjudicatory services and serving as intermediaries between the state or international organizations on one hand, and residents, on the other. For example, tribal authorities have been integral to the work of international organizations on reconciliation and the repatriation of individuals affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which occupied various parts of Anbar from 2014 to 2017.

During this occupation, according to many interviewed NGOs, the Government of Iraq (GOI) suspended the registrations of NGOs in the governorate and, in many cases, has not yet lifted them. As a post-conflict environment, Anbar is the site of many local and international reconstruction and reintegration programs aimed at rebuilding infrastructure, providing basic services, as well as encouraging social cohesion and reconciliation in the local community. As such, its civil society faces a different environment than its counterparts in areas of south and south-central Iraq, which were not invaded by ISIS.

In this environment, one of the greatest challenges described to the research team by the NGOs of Anbar is the proliferation of Baghdad-based organizations with offices in Anbar, associated with political offices and entities. These organizations are competitors who can win grants and other opportunities from international organizations, but are not dedicated to serving the needs of the community, but rather of profiting from post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization funds and of entrenching themselves in the governorate. Among those registered in Anbar, the most popular types of organizations are humanitarian aid, education, and relief.

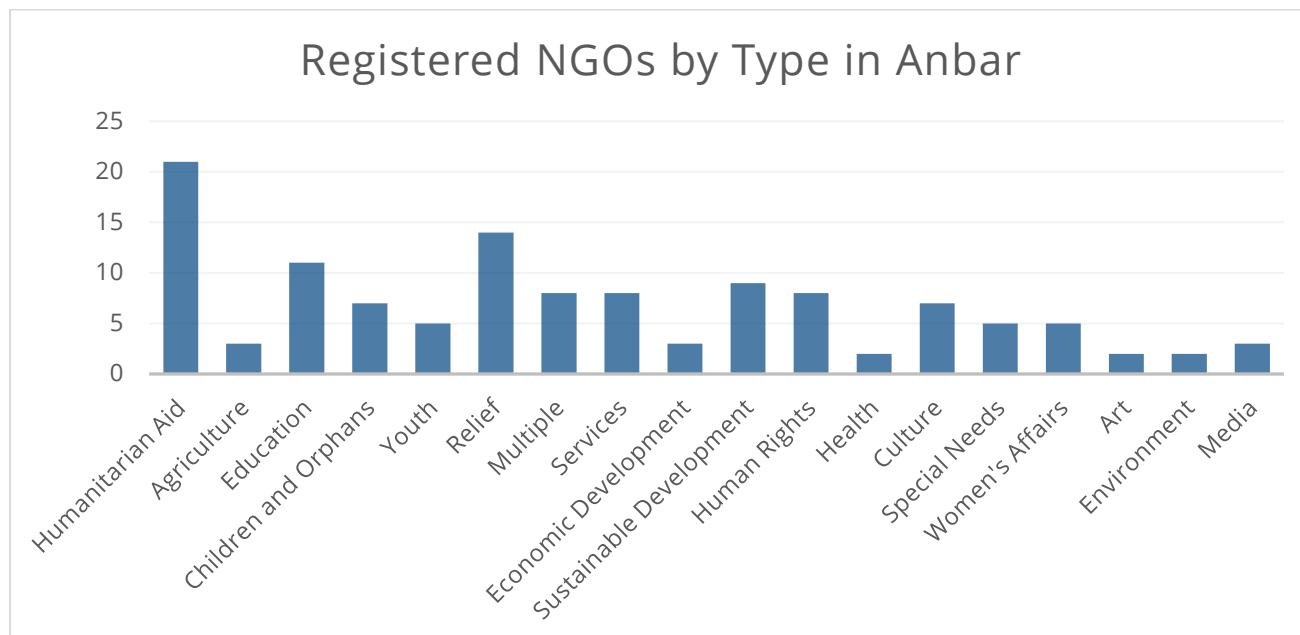


Figure 4

With regards to the protests, Anbar was distant from the protest activity and most organizations did not join. Some activists explain that it was due to security concerns that they did not participate, an explanation found in numerous other studies and reports on the October Protest Movement, which found that many activists in Sunni inhabited areas feared being labeled as ISIS sympathizers if they participated in anti-government protests (Alshamary, 2020; Jiyad et al., 2020). One activist from a humanitarian organization stated that “the situation for civil society has

changed after the protests because of the pursuits of the security forces due to our support of the protests, as well as the lack of freedom of expression in Anbar governorate in particular.”¹²

Despite these fears, the research team described a higher degree of willingness and less fearfulness towards interviews by NGOs in Anbar than their counterparts in the south and south-central, though the number of active organizations was lower in Anbar. In addition, the heads of most NGOs in Anbar are not state employees, but are employed in the private sector, which is different from other governorates in Iraq.

With regards to social constraints, NGOs in Anbar reported restrictions due to the prevalence of tribal customs in the area, including restriction on women’s participation.¹³ The relationship with tribes is not simple. One of the active organizations in Anbar is headed by a tribal leader who described a variety of activities including a survey of Jurf Al-Sakhar, an area on the border of Anbar and Babil governorates that was occupied by ISIS and is now the site of contestation because its residents have not been allowed to return by the largely Shi’a paramilitary groups that now control the area.¹⁴

They also described a change in the governorate where people increasingly began viewing NGOs as having ulterior motives: “people developed a negative image of civil society because of some opportunists. Political reasons play a large role, some organizations support politicians and the public began to view NGOs as having political goals and people began to move away from voluntarism.”¹⁵

The NGOs described a more supportive relationship with the federal government,¹⁶ which differs from the responses of other governorates detailed in subsequent sections. It bears to keep in mind that the twice-elected Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohammad Al-Halbousi, was the former governor of Anbar and has been credited with spearheading reconstruction projects. His position may have played a role in solidifying center-periphery relations.

3.2 Babil

Babil is a governorate in the Mid-Euphrates region, located south of Baghdad and east of Anbar governorate. It’s capital, Hillah, is a populous city inhabited by Shi’a Arabs, but its peripheral areas – towns like Iskandariyya, Musayab and Jurf Al-Sakhar are home to many Sunni Arabs as well. The governorate has a population of about two million and has enjoyed relative stability and prosperity, when compared to other areas in Iraq. However, it did witness spikes of violence in the mid-2000s as well as during the war against ISIS, in which paramilitary groups fought for control of areas along the border with Anbar, leading many residents to flee. Moreover, activists in Hillah described an increasingly oppressive environment after their participation in the October Protest Movement, during which local activists were targeted for intimidation and assassination.

There are 146 organizations registered in Babil, devoted primarily to sustainable development, human rights, humanitarian aid, and culture. One of the NGOs, which focused on women’s rights and relied on aid from international organizations described the environment of civil society as having changed in Iraq: “Many youth have begun to ask and to inquire whereas the very term ‘civil society’ was unknown in the past, but social media has played a role in raising awareness of civil society and attracting volunteers from youth and even from tribal leaders...”.¹⁷ The cultural constraints that many organizations in Babil feel stem from the tribalism of the community¹⁸, and the difficulties of women engaging in voluntarism,¹⁹ particularly in rural areas.²⁰

¹² Anbar interview 112. August 2021.

¹³ Anbar interview 72. August 2021.

¹⁴ Anbar interview 88. August 2021.

¹⁵ Anbar interview 82. August 2021.

¹⁶ Anbar interview 72. August 2021.

¹⁷ Babil interview 99. April, 2021.

¹⁸ Babil interview 268. April 2021.

¹⁹ Babil interviews 56, 76. April 2021.

²⁰ Babil interview 184. April 2021.

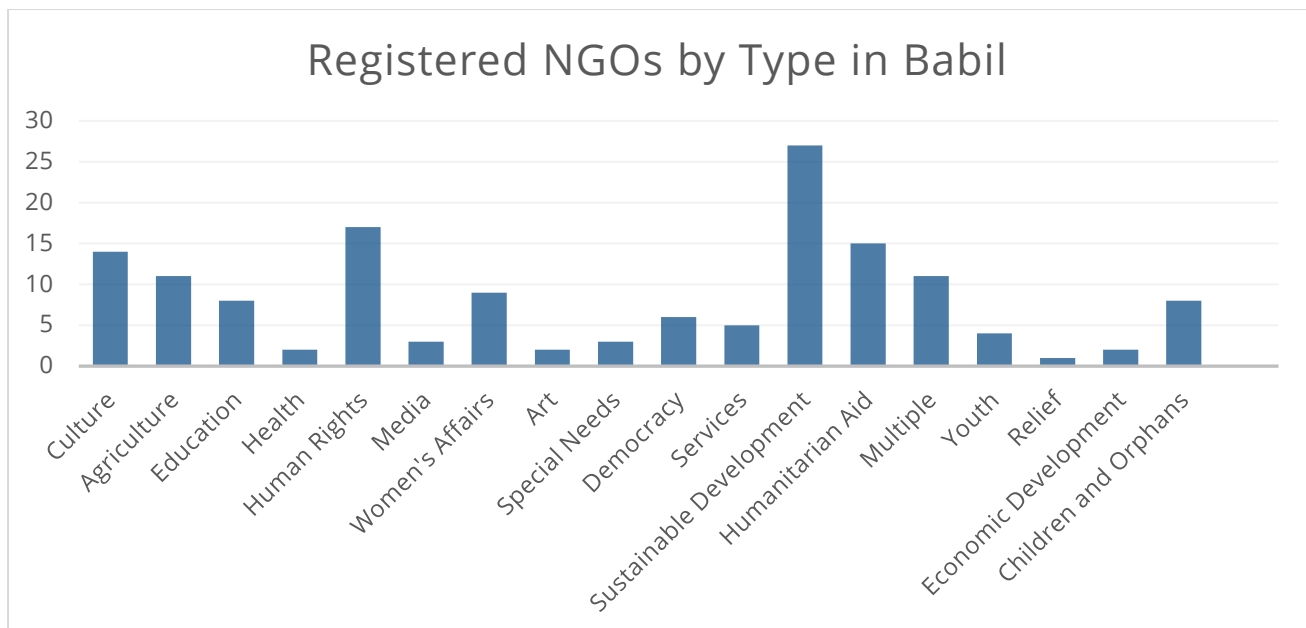


Figure 5

This relationship with the public was witnessed during the October Protest Movement, where some of these NGOs reported participating by hosting workshops and awareness-raising activities (for example “What is the constitution?” and “How to interact with the government”) as well as cultural ones. In Babil, NGOs seemed united in their support of the protests but also in their desire to educate and provide contextual information to protestors, including cautioning them from attacking public property.²¹ With regards to the disruptiveness of the protests, the most extreme response was from a youth and human rights organization who, in interview, said that their office had been burned.²² Some expressed a fear of joining the protests or were silent about them.²³ Others expressed logistic difficulties caused by protests, including roads being cut off and economic collapse.²⁴ And, conversely, a handful of NGOs described being motivated by the protests to advocate for the rights of protestors, and interestingly enough these NGOs did not specialize in human rights or advocacy, but rather in topics like relief, children and orphans, and humanitarian aid.²⁵ Despite this, some NGOs stressed that the impact of the protests on everyday life did not compare to the disruption of everyday life caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁶

With regards to the relationship to the local government, one NGO in Babil reported that the governor would send an adviser when organizations held a meeting, but this only became possible when the head of one of the NGOs became the deputy governor of Babil. Other NGOs described ties to the local government, but very few ties to the federal government. These local ties, however, were non-material and did not include donations or financial support from the local government.²⁷ Most described their process of registration as difficult and time-consuming, but the time of registration varied from group to group. Moreover, most heads of organizations were public sector employees, with an interest in using their skills in new ways. Organizations in Babil primarily get their funding through the members themselves (self-financing) or through ties to international organizations.

3.3 Baghdad

Baghdad governorate is the most populated in Iraq and it contains 1989 registered organizations, though many of them operate in multiple governorates with Baghdad as their base. The most popular types of NGOs registered in Baghdad are devoted to human rights, humanitarian aid, and culture. Baghdad suffered a lot of violence post-2003

²¹ Babil interview 72, 84. April 2021.

²² Babil interview 12. April 2021.

²³ Babil interview 56, 138. April 2021.

²⁴ Babil interview 72. April 2021.

²⁵ Babil interview 222. April 2021.

²⁶ Babil interview 12, 40. April, 2021.

²⁷ Babil interview 222. April 2021.

but has recently become more stable, thus creating space for organizations to function. At the same time, as the capital, it is one of the most politicized areas in the country with headquarters for various political organizations and paramilitary groups, as well as numerous governmental offices guarded by security checkpoints.

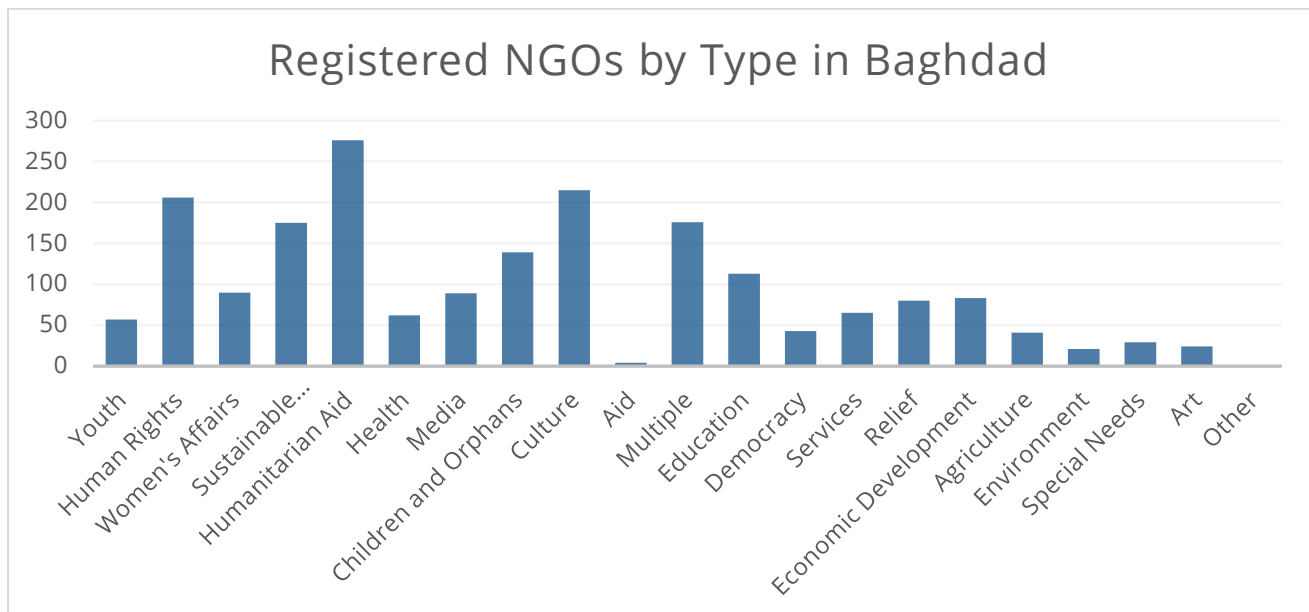


Figure 6

The largest anti-government protests in Iraq's recent history took place in Tahrir Square in October 2019, rapidly spreading to other governorates in the south and south-central. For months, Baghdad was at a standstill. Protestors were attacked and killed in Tahrir Square and in other areas of Baghdad, while targeted assassinations continued to take place after the protests ended and a new government was formed. In this atmosphere, activists, and members of civil society organizations in Baghdad were wary to comment, particularly on the October Protest Movement but also on their views of the local and federal governments, opting to give short and vague answers like "they [the government] do not support us" or "there is no relationship with them [the government]" and declining to elaborate. Nevertheless, the research team was able to discern some information about associational life in the Iraqi capital, based on a handful of interviews that were granted, as well as anonymized surveys that organizations were more willing to fill out.

According to this information, in Baghdad, single-mandate organizations are much more effective and active than multiple-mandate organizations. In the interviews, those with more focused specializations and goals also tended to be older organizations with connections with local and international organizations. The research team also indicated that organizations established between 2003 and 2016 tended to be more socially oriented and less politicized than the ones created after 2016, many of which are affiliated with political parties or espouse specific ideologies.

For those NGOs who chose to answer the question about the October Protest Movement, a variety of answers was offered. In fact, some even reinterpreted the question away from the role of civil society to what the role of civil society *should* be: "Civil society should play an advisory role particularly when it comes to not harming public property and those protests should not be divisive and should make demands that are actionable."²⁸ At the same time, some organizations in Baghdad described the impact of the protests as distracting attention away from everything else, including civil society.²⁹ These organizations also described logistical difficulties they faced to operate during the protests, but ultimately believed "although our work stopped because of the youth protests, they have the freedom to think and behave as they please, of course".³⁰

²⁸ Baghdad interview 17. April 2021.

²⁹ Baghdad interview 29, 31. April 2021.

³⁰ Baghdad interview 560. April 2021.

Most organizations were supportive of the protest movement though they were not equal in the degree to which they demonstrated their support. Some had participated in the protests (“we want to protest because there is no attention paid to our natural rights”)³¹, others were working on awareness campaigns and workshops for the protest movement, some had members who participated, but as an organization only supported from afar.

These organizations also described an increasingly hostile environment in which political parties tried to capitalize on the popularity of certain NGOs. One activist described the situation:

The societal perception of charitable organizations is still bad and they still do not consider organizations important or having an active role in shaping society. The use of NGOs by political parties during election campaigns has contributed to the bad reputation of NGOs generally... even when one organization accepts to play a political role, this reflects badly on how the public perceives the role of civil society broadly.³²

Another organization, focusing on children and orphans, as well as women’s affairs said that the major social challenge they faced in Baghdad was pressure from political parties.³³

Many of these NGOs have no contact with international organizations but are eager for international support, including in the form of capacity building. In fact, many see international support as the only way to expand organizations, as they tend to rely on limited internal donations to function. With regards to funding, most organizations were wary of providing information about the source of their funding. For example, a Christian charity in Baghdad described their funding as coming only from ethical sources: “we only do what pleases God.”³⁴

Their relationship with the local and the federal government – both of which are housed in Baghdad – is equally distant. Indeed, some mentioned that after the dissolution of provincial councils, many of these organizations lost their means of communicating with local judicial and executive authorities.

3.4 Basra

Basra is one of Iraq’s largest governorates and an important economic and oil-producing hub, as it has the only outlet to the sea in an otherwise nearly landlocked country. In recent history, it has been known to be the site of recurring summer protests due to the high poverty, high unemployment, and poor quality of public services, including chiefly, unsafe polluted drinking water.³⁵

Residents of Basra were active participants in the October Protest Movement and many activists suffered reprisals at the hands of armed actors for their participation. In fact, a respondent from an NGO specializing in women’s affairs said that one of the biggest challenges that NGOs face in Basra is intimidation and threats from armed actors.³⁶ Two other organizations, both working in sustainable development cited increasing threats against NGOs because of the protests, even though their participation was limited to informative workshops.³⁷ Accordingly, the research team expected civil society in Basra to be both amongst the most active and the wariest in providing interviews. Contrary to expectations, Basra-based NGOs were not only active but were also open in their responses and willing to participate.

There are 310 NGOs registered in Basra with the most popular specializations being in humanitarian aid, sustainable development, human rights, and culture.

³¹ Baghdad interview 56. April 2021.

³² Baghdad interview 46. May 2021.

³³ Baghdad interview 122. May 2021.

³⁴ Baghdad interview 20. April 2021.

³⁵ Belkis Wille, “Basra is Thirsty: Iraq’s Failure to Manage the Water Crisis”, Human Rights Watch, July 22, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty/iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis>.

³⁶ Basra interview 26. May 2021.

³⁷ Basra interview 134, 248. April 2021.

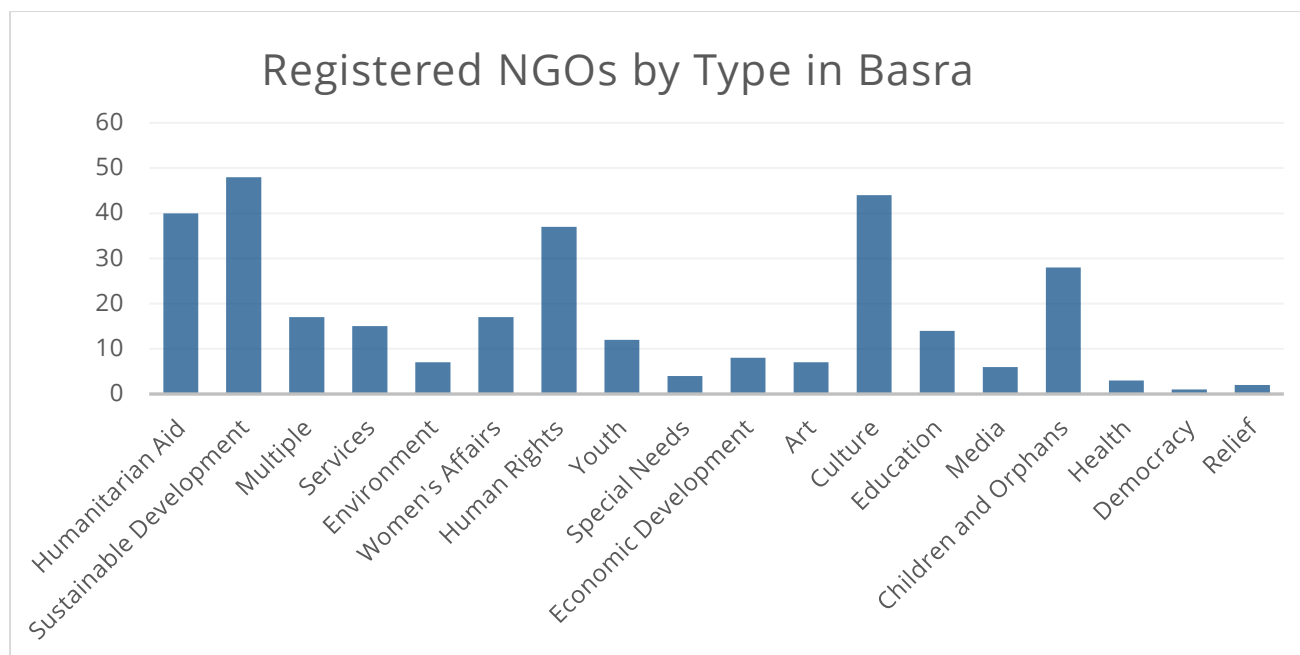


Figure 7

There are many organizations that are independent of political affiliations and that expressed the desire to be trained in applying to grants from international organizations, as many of them feel that politicized NGOs have had more success securing grants and trainings. In addition, older organizations – particularly those established before 2011 – were more active and less likely to be fronts for political parties. Moreover, single-mandate NGOs in Basra were also more active than multi-mandate NGOs, like Baghdad.

Basra-based NGOs gave nuanced answers when it came to protest participation. Many of them explained that they had participated as individuals, but not as a civil society organization. As organizations, however, they supported peaceful protests. To illustrate, one of the heads of the older NGOs in Basra (which has been in operation since 2004) and focuses on human rights and democracy, explained that they were supportive of protests so long as “there is no burning or destruction of state property”.³⁸

Moreover, many organizations of similar longevity expressed a similar dynamic with the government: few ties to the federal government, difficulties in registration, but a working relationship with the local government that extended to shared meetings.³⁹

Like many other places in Iraq, many NGOs in Basra are led by public sector employees and rely on internal donations from board members to function. And like many governorates in Iraq, Basra is a tribal society, and many interviewees describe the tribal culture as being challenging to work in, particularly as it limits women’s ability to volunteer and join organizations.⁴⁰ This, according to one organization, was exacerbated by the protest movement and by the pandemic, during which women’s participation decreased further.⁴¹ Despite these difficulties Basra is home to many organizations that are run by women.

3.5 Dhi Qar

Like Basrawis, residents of Dhi Qar were also active participants in the October Protest Movement, particularly in the capital city of Nasriya. Nasriya’s central square – Habubi Square – became a locus of the movement, rivaling

³⁸ Basra interview 8. April, 2021.

³⁹ Basra interview 10. April, 2021.

⁴⁰ Basra interview 104, 180. May 2021.

⁴¹ Basra interview 134. May 2021.

Baghdad's Tahrir Square at times and witnessed high levels of violence. According to a UNAMI report, in the first week of October, 21 people were killed by gunfire in Dhi Qar's capital, Nasriya.⁴²

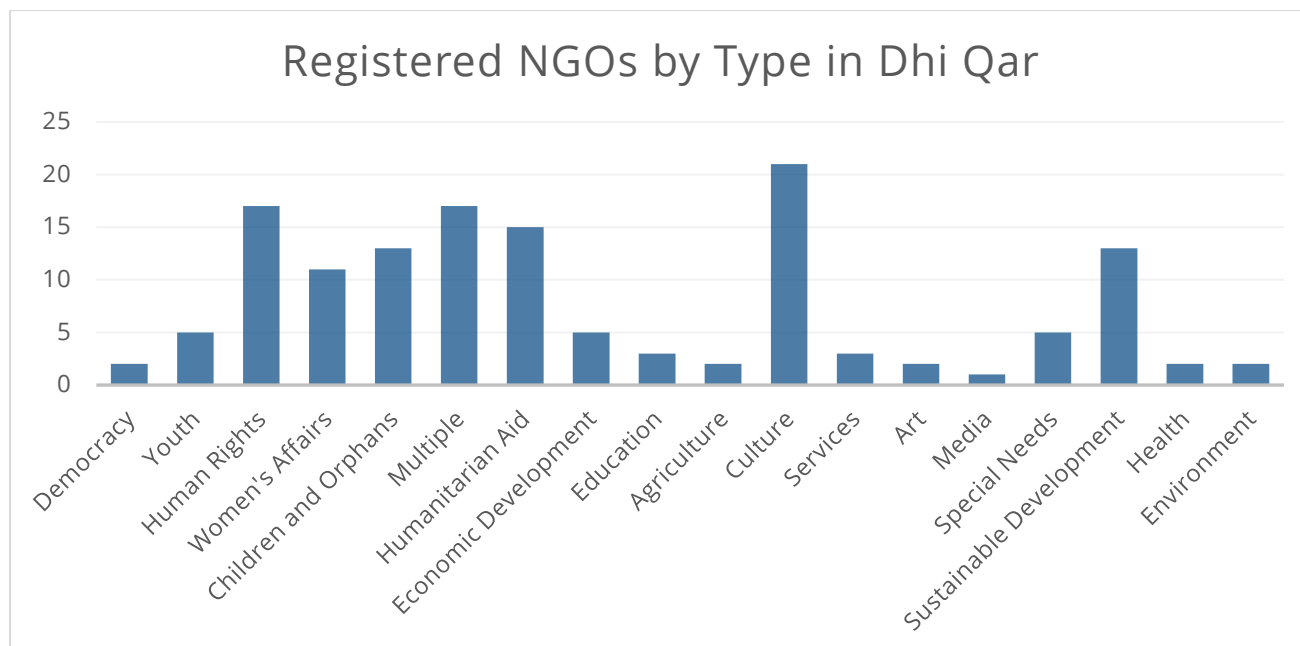


Figure 8

Poverty and dire living conditions in the governorate have driven its residents to frequent protests. Dhi Qar's civil society faces a lot of pressure from armed actors threatening to punish activists for their protest participation. Some NGOs in Dhi Qar declined to share any identifying information in the interviews, because of their participation in the protests and the killing of some of their members. Perhaps more so than any other governorate in Iraq, the violence of the protests has directly impacted civil society in Dhi Qar, as many members of NGOs were killed and their organizations suffered from their loss.

Among the 139 organizations registered in Dhi Qar, the most popular specializations are in humanitarian aid, sustainable development, human rights, and culture.

Many organizations in Dhi Qar were involved in the protest movement and those who had agreed to be interviewed or surveyed, which were a minority, were open about their support and the repercussions of their actions. Even those whose work was frozen as a result were enthusiastic about the protests, "civil society had a positive role in establishing the protests because civil society demands rights and demands services and respects humans above all else, regardless of their religion, sex, identities or loyalties".⁴³ Another youth organization was candid about the atmosphere in Nasriya saying that "the reaction of organizations to the protests was varied, some had a large role in aiding the protestors and in participating and others, like us, chose the path of silence but we nevertheless had our activities be frozen."⁴⁴

Most organizations in Dhi Qar said that civil society has grown in Iraq in the last few years. They also described a weak relationship with the local government, that would reciprocate but was never proactive, and no relationship with the federal government. In fact, many organizations complained that some of the key challenges that faced civil society in the governorate were the lack of understanding from the local government. Unsurprisingly, many NGOs also complained about the influence of tribes in the governorate as another key obstacle.

⁴² UNAMI report.

⁴³ Nasriya interview 62. June 2021.

⁴⁴ Nasriya interview 160. June 2021.

3.6 Diyala

Diyala is a governorate that lies north of Baghdad and south of Sulaymaniyah and shares a border with Iran to the east. It has several prominent cities including its capital, Baqubah, as well as Khanaqin, a disputed territory with the Kurdistan Region. It has a mixed population of Sunnis, Shi'a, and Kurds, as well as minorities including the Mandaean. In the mid-2000s, Baqubah and the areas surrounding it were controlled by Al-Qaeda Iraq.

Diyala activists faced threats in 2014, and the atmosphere of fear surrounding civil society continues. The prevalence of politicized organizations has also led to a sense of public distrust of civil society amongst residents. Diyala-based NGOs were very hesitant to participate in interviews and thereby we had a very low response rate of only 12 organizations out of a total of 160 that were registered.

With regards to activities, NGOs in Diyala focus on sustainable development, humanitarian aid, and relief.

NGOs reported that there was a lot of migration out of the northern parts of the governorate in 2014, due to the war with ISIS. Because there were no protests in Diyala, the 2019 protests had a different effect on the local community. According to one NGO, specializing in culture, the protests ignited a sense of citizenship and a realization of what constituted citizen rights, which led to campaigns, including for example, a campaign to issue voter cards.⁴⁵

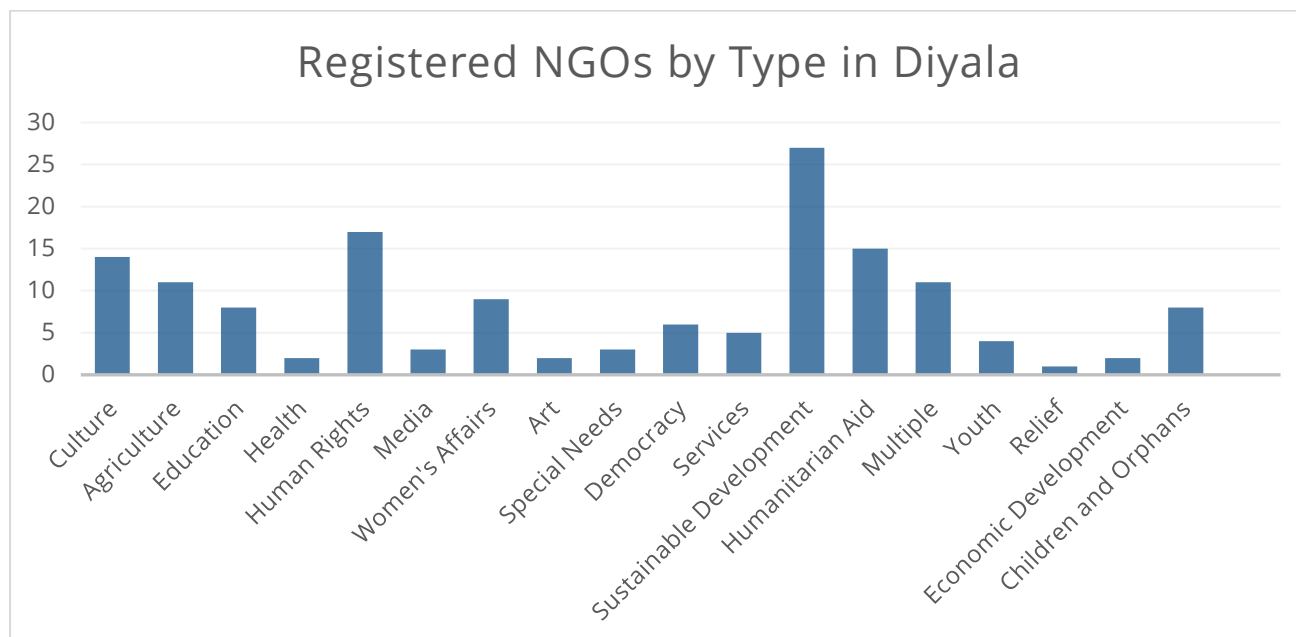


Figure 9

Many of the organizations interviewed in Diyala implemented a monthly membership to support the organization, a model seen less often in other governorates. However, due to the very small sample of interviewees, it is hard to generalize from this.

3.7 Karbala

Karbala governorate is home to one of the holiest shrines in Shi'a Islam, that of Imam Al-Hussain. It welcomes millions of pilgrims annually from within Iraq and from throughout the Shi'a world and thus relies economically on tourism and commerce. Since 2003, it has been one of the safest and most secure governorates in the country, with relatively fewer security incidents. Many of its residents mobilized into the Popular Mobilization Forces in 2014,

⁴⁵ Diyala interview 48. July 2021.

following the invasion of northern Iraq by ISIS. As a result of this mobilization, the city is caught between two power centers: that of the popular mobilization forces and the religious authorities in the holy shrines.

In this security environment, Karbala-based activists have always been fearful due to a string of assassinations targeting local activists and thinkers that pre-dated the October Protest Movement. Alaa Mashzoub, a Karbalai historian and writer was shot dead in February 2019. Many locals and analysts attribute his killing to his criticism of Iranian intervention in Iraq, as well as the growing influence of militias in the state and the governorate. After the October 2019 protests, which also took place in Karbala, many local activists who participated were targeted. One of them, Ihab Al-Wazni, was assassinated in May 2021, in the middle of the data collection for this report.

Although the interviews for Karbala were conducted in March and April 2021, data collection was put on pause in many southern governorates following Al-Wazni's death, which inspired demonstrations and the attempted burning of the Iranian consulate in Karbala. Most importantly, Al-Wazni's death inspired an electoral boycott movement that had been simmering for months, at the level of both voters and emerging political parties, who did not run in the October 2021 elections due to what they described as an inhospitable security environment.⁴⁶

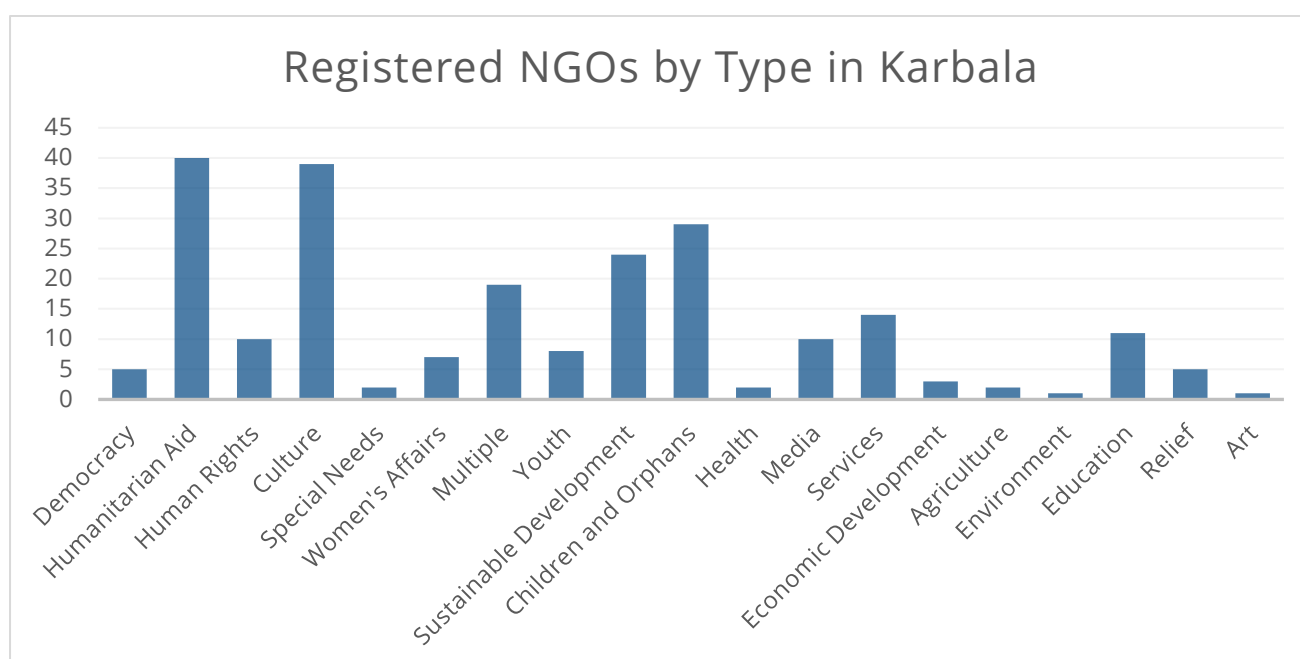


Figure 10

NGOs registered in Karbala, which number 232, focus primarily on the categories of humanitarian aid, culture, and children and orphans. Drawing from the surveys and interviews to gauge the nature of active organizations revealed that the governorate was largely devoted to various charity work, as well as to cultural events rooted in religious narratives surrounding the area's history as the site of the Battle of Karbala, a key event in the history of Shi'ism which took place in 680 AD.

Moreover, many of the organizations that were interviewed in Karbala expressed a positive change in the governorate's stance towards voluntarism in the last few years, describing a societal shift towards volunteering and accepting civil society.

One of the larger organizations in Karbala, which focuses on youth, was the only interviewee in the governorate to respond that they have cooperated with both the local and federal government.⁴⁷ Their stance towards the protests

⁴⁶ Marsin Alshamary, "Iraqi Elections 2021: Independents and New Political Parties", Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, January 2022, <https://www.kas.de/documents/266761/0/Marsin+Alshamary+-+Iraqi+Elections+2021+Independents+and+New+Political+Parties.pdf/52c013da-0c90-161d-51f5-632e79ca7984?version=1.0&t=1642142693879>.

⁴⁷ Karbala interview 220. May 2021.

also differed from other governorates, claiming that some NGOs from the governorate had advocated for violence while others had advocated for peaceful protests. As a result, the narrative was disjointed and trust in civil society had gone down. Although not mentioned in the interview, details from the social media accounts of the organization revealed that they enjoyed ties with Imam Hussein holy shrine establishment. Similarly, another NGO, focusing on charity to widows and orphans, has been in operation since 2003 and was funded due to the authorization made by the offices of various elite clerics, allowing adherents to pay their religious taxes directly to the organization itself.⁴⁸ A third cultural NGO, established only in 2020 by a student of the religious seminaries, relied on members donations to put on cultural events largely surrounding the commemoration of the Battle of Karbala.

That these types of organizations featured in the interviews conducted by the research team does not necessarily indicate that the majority of NGOs in Karbala were religiously oriented, but rather, that religiously oriented NGOs in Karbala have less security concerns. In fact, previous research indicates that Karbala (the district) and Najaf (the other holy site in south-central Iraq) do not have a higher proportion of religious organizations than other districts do.⁴⁹

Karbala contains many NGOs that are non-religious in nature and many of those are well-networked with organizations elsewhere in Iraq. Similar to many organizations that have been discussed thus far, these NGOs describe themselves as having no direct role in the protests, but being supportive of non-violent means, particularly those with single mandates that were far from advocacy work.⁵⁰ For example, a small, health-focused NGO said that they “had organized meetings with protestors, and we supported protests that relied on peaceful means and that demanded legal rights.”⁵¹ They were also less likely to have a relationship with the local and federal governments.

3.8 Kirkuk

Like parts of Diyala governorate, Kirkuk is also a disputed territory. Its population is diverse, consisting of Turkmen, Assyrians, Kurds, Arabs and Armenians, as many refer to it, a microcosm of Iraq. Kirkuk in the past has been the site of ethnic massacres and “Arabization” campaigns under the Saddam Hussein dictatorship. While Article 140 in the Iraqi Constitution declared its status will be resolved by the end of 2007, this has not been the case and its back-and-forth control of the governorate by various governors and armed groups, has made Kirkuk one of the most difficult governorates to access information from.

The struggle between the federal Government of Iraq (GOI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over influence in the governorate and its institutions has disrupted the civil society scene. For one, the information presented below is about organizations registered with the federal government, and there can be organizations registered under the KRG NGO Directorate that were not accessible for this report.

Secondly, the tense security environment and the multiplicity of security actors make NGOs wary of interviews, as some registered NGOs have associations with political entities and others fear being monitored by them. Thus, this report provides some background information that is biased by the aforementioned points and acknowledges limitations in its findings on Kirkuk. Future research can rely on data sources from both GOI and KRG to examine how the changes in security of the area have impacted the activities of civil society. Future research can also examine how each of the governorate’s ethnic and religious communities have developed their own micro-civil societies, which was one of the preliminary observations from the research team.

One of the interesting micro-civil societies that has developed is the Turkmen one, which has gathered under the umbrella of the “Turkman Foundation for the Iraq Civil Society Development.” The research team has highlighted the work of many active Turkmen organizations in Kirkuk, including ones focused on women’s affairs, relief, and charity.

⁴⁸ Karbala interview 39. May 2021.

⁴⁹ Marsin Alshamary, “Postwar Development of Civil Society in Iraq’s Mid Euphrates Region”.

⁵⁰ Karbala interview 144, 178. May 2021.

⁵¹ Karbala interview 178. May 2021.

The Kirkuk-based organizations registered with the federal government number 177 and focus predominantly on humanitarian aid, women's affairs, and human rights. The prevalence of NGOs working on women's affairs is particularly notable, as it is higher than in the other governorates. For example, one of the women's affairs organizations interviewed by the research team was a Turkmen NGO focusing on empowering women.

The challenges that faced the research team in Kirkuk also face civil society in the governorate, as one activist explained "until now there is no spirit of nationalism, the ethnic and religious diversity make work difficult".⁵² Along similar lines, another organization working in relief complained that organizations tend to not understand the complexities of working in Kirkuk and that these types of organizations represent the greatest challenges to the work of civil society in the governorate.⁵³

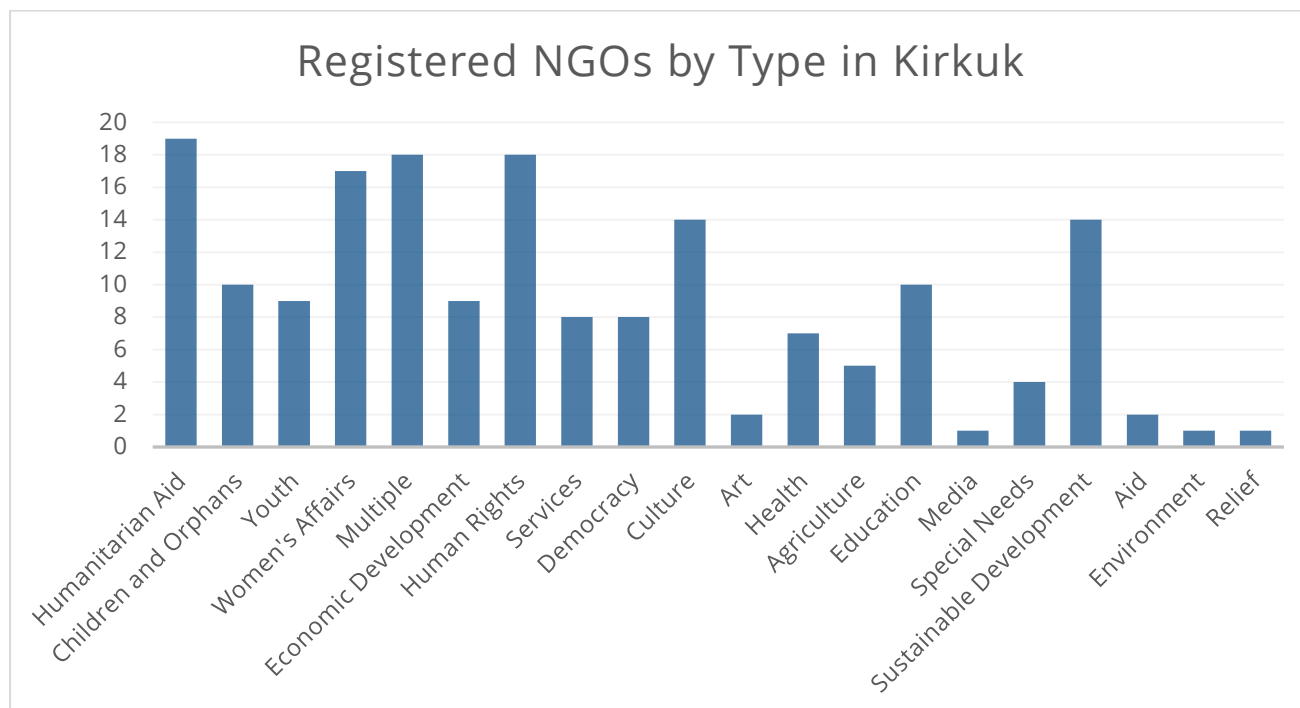


Figure 11

In general, the research team had a difficult time accessing NGOs for interviews in Kirkuk and many NGOs that we approached were unwilling to participate.

3.9 Maysan

Maysan lies in southern Iraq, at the border with Iran. It contains some of Iraq's marshlands and is one of the poorer areas in the country. According to the World Bank, although only 2.9 percent of Iraqis are from Maysan, 5.8 percent of Iraq's poor are from this governorate.⁵⁴

Many residents of Maysan participated in the October Protest Movement and according to UNAMI reports, protestors were injured and killed there as far back as early October.⁵⁵ Owing to this, civil society respondents were as cautious as their co-nationals in other governorates that had participated in the protests. One of the organizations described the state of civil society in the governorate as having been "beautiful but the insistence of

⁵² Kirkuk interview 123. June 2021.

⁵³ Kirkuk interview 19. June 2021.

⁵⁴ Tara Vishwanath, Dhiraj Sharma, Nandini Krishnan, and Brian Blankespoor, "Where are Iraq's Poor? Mapping Poverty in Iraq," *The World Bank Poverty Assessments*, 2015. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/889801468189231974/pdf/97644-WP-P148989-Box391477B-PUBLIC-Iraq-Poverty-Map-6-23-15-web.pdf>.

⁵⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, "Demonstrations in Iraq," *Human Rights Special Report*, October 2019. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNAMI%20Special%20Report%20on%20Demonstrations%20in%20Iraq_22%20October%202019.pdf.

targeting the heads of organizations made many withdraw and leave their work”.⁵⁶ In the protest movement, another NGO leader told us that “a lot of our friends in other organizations that we work with were killed and others had to flee and for that reason we had to stop work because of the protests, because the public had developed a bad image of protestors and of organizations”.⁵⁷ Other organizations said that their work had been impacted logistically by the protests, which caused them to move their organization’s headquarters several times.⁵⁸

The seemingly popular Sadrist governor, Ali Dawai, received criticism from some of the NGOs for making civil society work difficult. One NGO working in culture complained that “the governor is not cooperative with organizations and this causes a lot of friction in the work of local organizations”.⁵⁹

Other NGOs complained that some of their endeavors, like work restoring the marshes, had received attention and support from international organizations but that support had declined after the war against ISIS ended and reconstruction needs arose in northern and western Iraq.⁶⁰

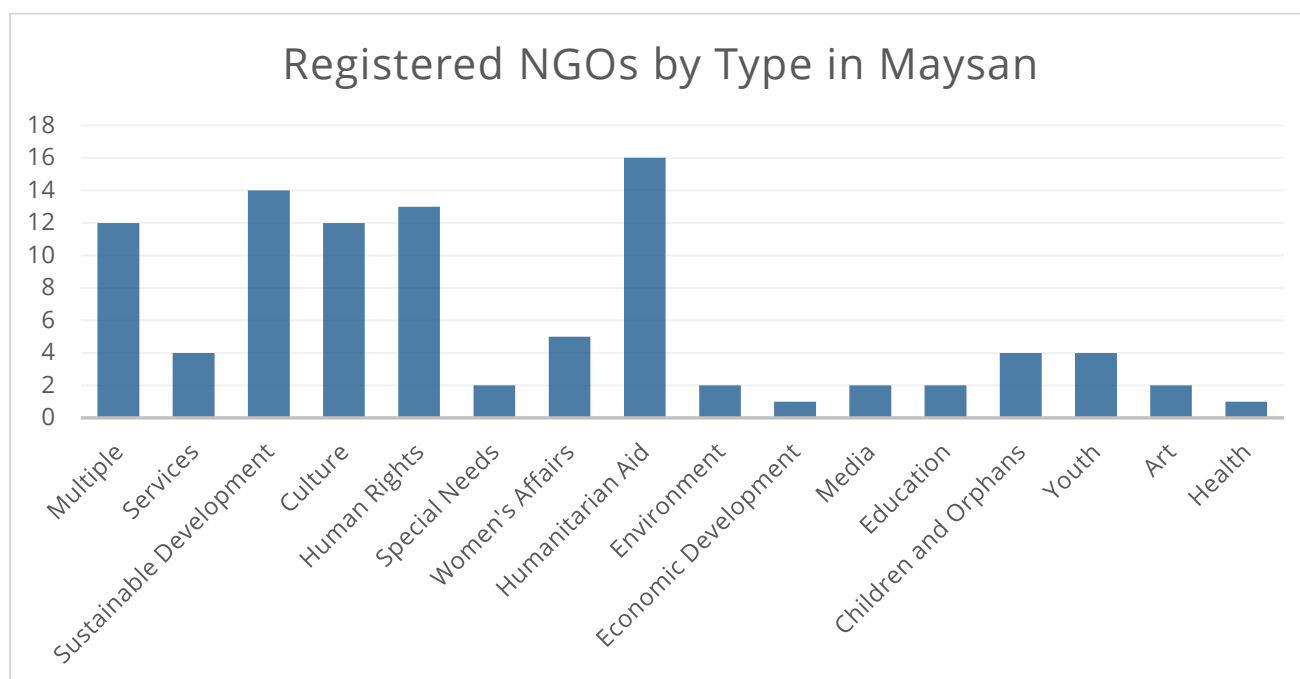


Figure 12

There are 96 NGOs registered in Maysan, operating mainly in sustainable development, culture, human rights, and humanitarian aid.

3.10 Muthanna

Muthanna is one of Iraq’s largest governorates by size and the smallest by population. Like Anbar governorate, it is mostly uninhabited terrain and shares a border with Saudi Arabia. The Tigris River runs through the northern part of the governorate where the capital city, Samawa is. The governorate is predominantly inhabited by Shi’a Arabs and has been neglected historically and in the contemporary era, leading to high poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment rates. Many of its residents had also participated in anti-government protests in 2019 and thus the same security concerns that permeate the other governorates of southern and south-central Iraq plague Muthanna as well. Despite them and despite the small population, the research team was able to interview 10 organizations in the governorate out of a total of 57 registered.

⁵⁶ Maysan interview 122. June 2021.

⁵⁷ Maysan interview 127. June 2021.

⁵⁸ Maysan interview 125. June 2021.

⁵⁹ Maysan interview 156. June 2021.

⁶⁰ Maysan interview 28. June 2021.

The most popular types of registered organizations in Muthanna operate in the fields of human rights, humanitarian aid, and culture.

Despite the small population size of the governorate, it has an active and formidable civil society. One of the organizations interviewed, specializing in women's affairs, has managed to secure support from multiple international organizations and has held many activities and programs supporting women in various forms.⁶¹

These organizations report little participation in the protests and some even describe the protests as having created logistical obstacles for civil society. Despite this, many recognized the importance of protests, particularly in the context of Muthanna saying that "the right to protest is guaranteed for all citizens and we support protestors because the governorate suffers from poverty and unemployment and we support all peaceful protests."⁶² Others complained of an unexpected effect of the protest movement, complaining that: "the protests impacted civil society greatly, the protests led to international organizations avoiding work in the southern governorates because of the lack of stability of the security situation and concentrating instead on the West of Iraq and on the Kurdistan Region."⁶³

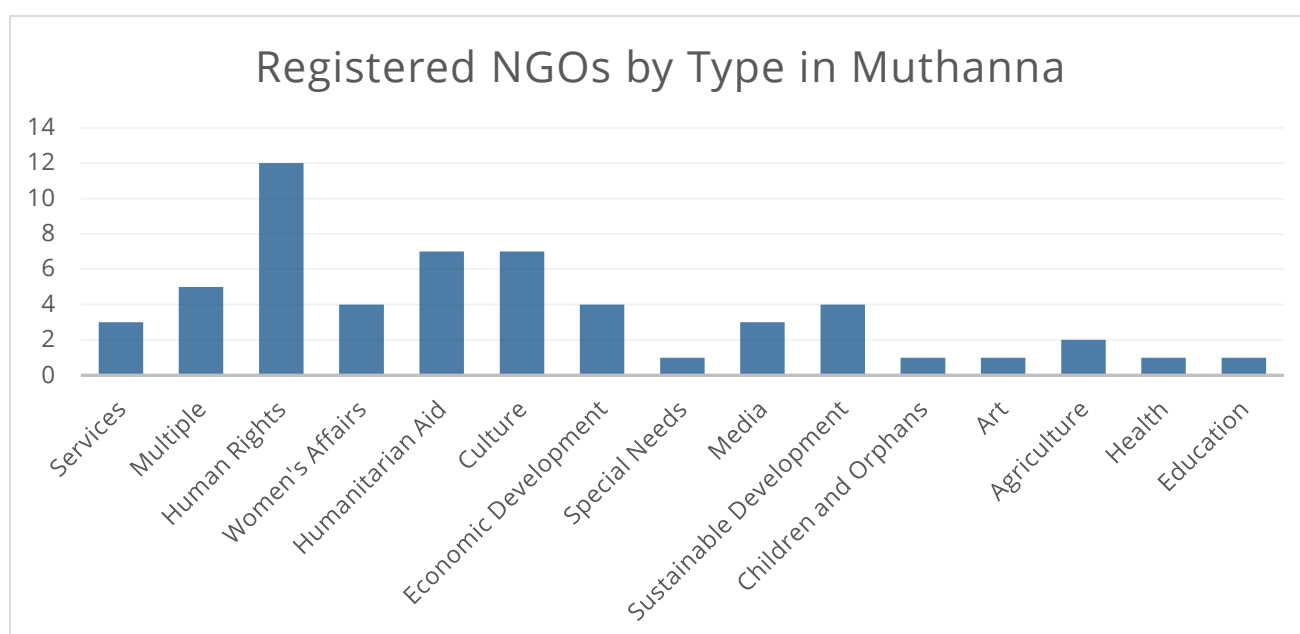


Figure 13

Many organizations reported an increased voluntarism in the community because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which spurred a spirit of communal collaboration.⁶⁴ In fact, some of the NGOs in the governorate spearheaded campaigns to encourage citizens to get vaccinated.⁶⁵

Despite this activity, many of the NGOs complained of a lack of available training, particularly with regards to grant applications. Apart from the women's affairs organization, all other NGOs the research team spoke with depended on internal and communal donations.

3.11 Najaf

Najaf governorate is home to the Shi'a religious establishment and the office of the influential Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. It houses important shrines and mosques and, like Karbala, is a center of pilgrimage. While its central

⁶¹ Muthanna interview 6. May 2021.

⁶² Muthanna interview 9. May 2021.

⁶³ Muthanna interview 11. May 2021.

⁶⁴ Muthanna interview 6, 9, 55. May 2021.

⁶⁵ Muthanna interview 53. May 2021.

districts are urbanized and rely on commerce and tourism, many of its outer districts are agricultural communities. It is one of the more prosperous areas of Iraq, particularly when compared to other governorates in the south and south-central regions.

Many people in Najaf joined Baghdad and the southern governorates in the October Protest Movement and witnessed violence throughout the protests as a result. Civil society in Najaf is wary of speaking openly to researchers, as there are multiple armed actors in the governorate.

Among the 320 organizations registered in Najaf, the most popular area of operation is culture, followed by humanitarian aid, and children and orphans.

Organizations in Najaf described their interaction with protests in different ways. Many said that they did not play a role in the protests but were supportive from afar.⁶⁶ A few described themselves as playing a “logistical” role.⁶⁷ Others claimed that many organizations were politicized and opposed the protests⁶⁸ and others yet criticized the protestors saying that “many civil society organizations participated in the protests in a true way but there were some protestors who did not want true reform.”⁶⁹

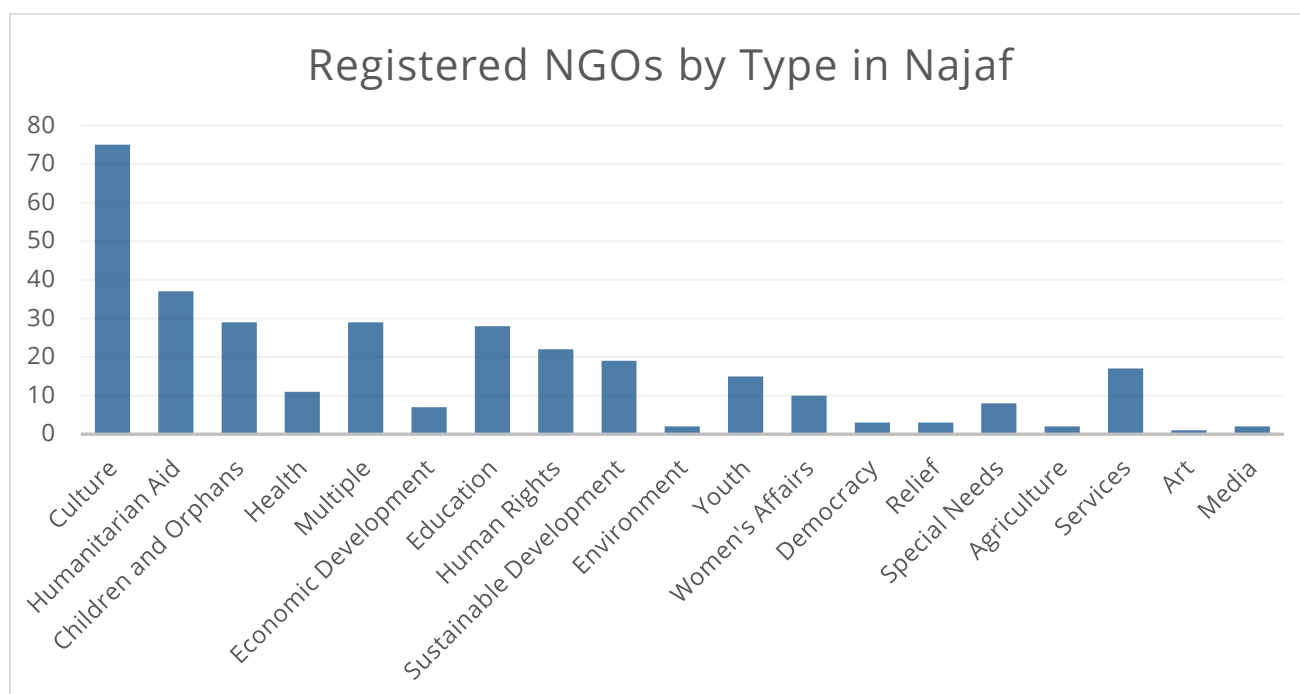


Figure 14

In addition, many organizations described the Covid-19 pandemic as being a greater challenge and disruption to their activities than the protests that preceded it.⁷⁰ Indeed, more than one organization said that their activities had stopped entirely because of the pandemic and many of these organizations rely on donations to exist.

Najaf society is tribal, and the research team observed that there are certain NGOs in the governorate that represented individual tribes and used the organizational capacity of the NGO to convene community leaders. Similarly, there are some organizations in Najaf that were created by political entities, including members of the Council of Representatives. Because of this, some Najafis view civil society with skepticism, associating it with politicized actors.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Najaf interview 12. May 2021.

⁶⁷ Najaf interview 96. May 2021.

⁶⁸ Najaf interview 192. May 2021.

⁶⁹ Najaf interview 249. May 2021.

⁷⁰ Najaf interview 15. May 2021.

⁷¹ Najaf interview 12. May 2021.

3.12 Ninewa

Ninewa is one of Iraq's most populous and diverse governorates. In addition to being home to the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul, it is also home to the Ninewa Plains, an area containing many small cities and towns that are home to Assyrians, Yazidis, Turkmen, Shabak, Kurds, Kakai's and others. The peripheral areas rely on agriculture economically while Mosul itself is a commercial and cultural hub.

Ninewa was occupied by ISIS, with Mosul as the declared capital of the caliphate, for nearly three years, during which the group brutalized and massacred minority populations, forcing many to flee. Although many internally displaced persons have now returned to their communities of origin, the war against ISIS resulted in demographic change, destruction of infrastructure, and the fraying of communal ties. Many international NGOs have devoted their energies to reconstructing and reconciling the governorate and many local organizations have emerged to aid in the path to recovery.

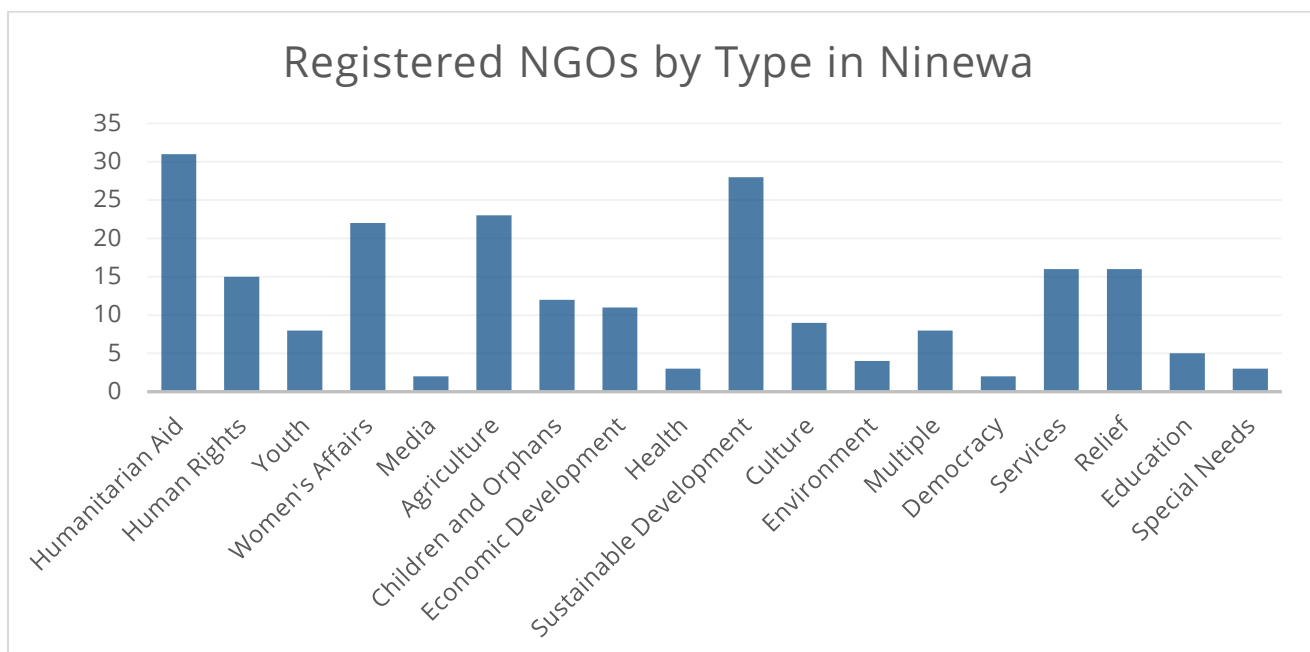


Figure 15

Like Anbar, Ninewa faced a significant time in which it was not under the Iraqi government, with understandably few organizations registering between 2014 and 2017 and many registering in 2019 and onwards. Ninewa organizations seem to specialize in humanitarian aid, women's affairs, agriculture, and sustainable development which makes sense due to the economic and reconstruction needs of the area. There are 218 organizations registered in Ninewa.

The research team was able to interview organizations from Mosul and Sinjar. The organizations from Sinjar expressed that they receive support from international organizations, but not from the local and federal governments. Similarly, other organizations explained that although they had good ties with both the local and federal governments, these ties did not amount to much as the governments were ineffectual. In terms of financing, many organizations in Ninewa received foreign aid but many also relied on self-financing.

Throughout the governorate, organizations explained that the protests had no effect on their activity, as they did not occur in Ninewa, and that civil society had no ties to the protests. At the same time, NGOs operating in these spaces must be wary of the presence of multiple and usually oppositional armed actors, which makes the security environment for interviews tense, but in a different way than the south and south-central governorates. This is particularly true in the disputed territories of the Ninewa Plains, Sinjar and Tel Afar, which fell under the operation of different security forces after the defeat of ISIS. In this atmosphere activists worry because "political parties and

groups have controlled most youth and engaged them in accomplishing their agendas so that youth now focus on political issues rather than nurturing their community”.⁷²

Nevertheless, other activists are optimistic about the outlook of civil society in Ninewa saying that “it has changed in a positive direction, now there is an increased spirit of humanitarian work and social work and the youth are preoccupied with positive things and distant from negative things that they were seeing under the ISIS occupation”.⁷³

3.13 Qadissiyah

Qadissiyah is mainly an agricultural governorate in south-central Iraq and suffers from similar grievances of poverty, unemployment, and poor public services as Basra and Dhi Qar do. Like many cities in southern Iraq, Qadissiyah’s capital, Diwaniya, is caught between the Sadrists and the Popular Mobilization Forces, creating an environment of fear and instability that prevents many activists from accomplishing their goals and developing their organizations. One of the observations of the research team in Diwaniya was that the NGOs were less connected to other NGOs in and outside of Iraq and had no tools for development and organizational capacity-building at their disposal. In many ways, the governorate is neglected by both the state and by the international community. In addition, many registered NGOs in the governorate are politicized through affiliation with the Sadrist Movement.

More so than any other governorate in Iraq, NGOs in Qadissiyah were pessimistic and cynical about Iraq and about civil society. For example, one respondent for a youth group complained that local government cooperates only with organizations that “shine” its image, or that make the local government look good.⁷⁴ Others complained that even when they were able to access foreign funding, political actors in Baghdad blocked it from them.⁷⁵ In the words of one women’s affairs activist “in southern areas, we are outside of the government’s attention”.⁷⁶

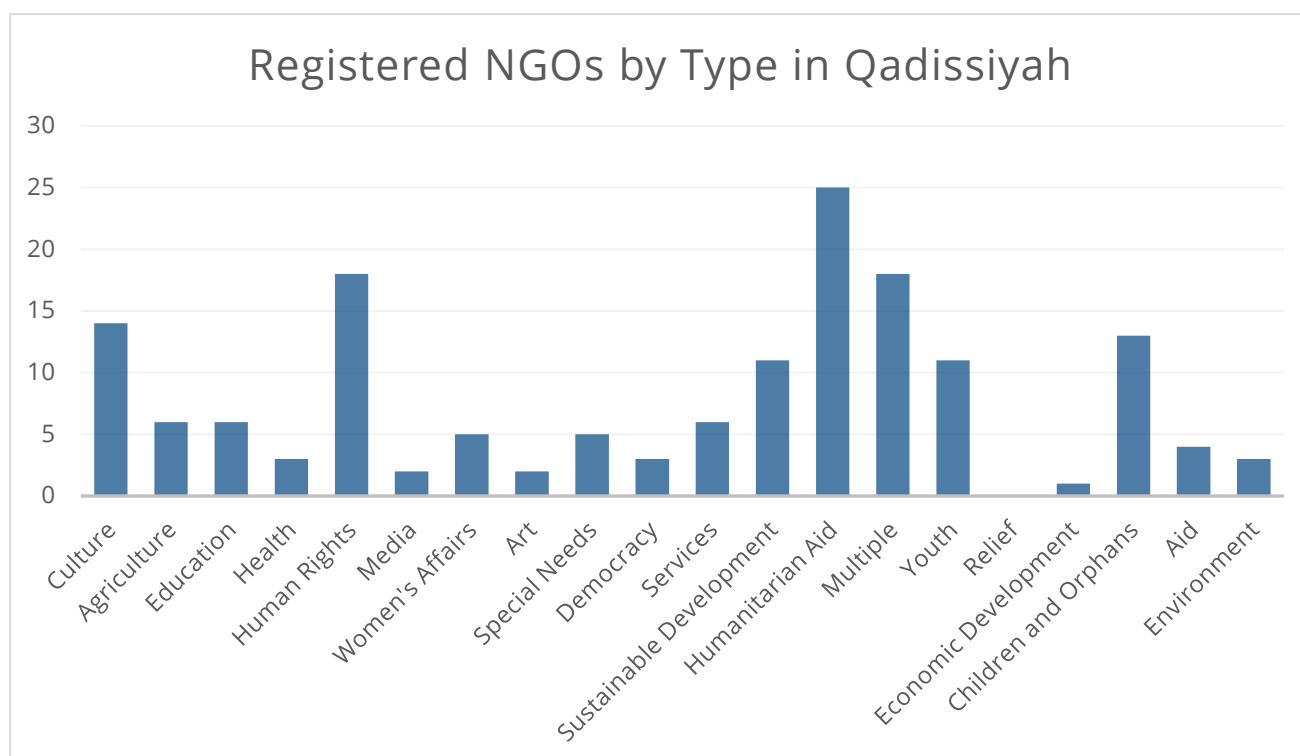


Figure 16

⁷² Ninewa interview 188. July 2021.

⁷³ Ninewa interview 189. June 2021.

⁷⁴ Diwaniya interview 109. June 2021.

⁷⁵ Diwaniya interview 195. June 2021.

⁷⁶ Diwaniya interview 52. June 2021.

Unsurprisingly, activists also complained of tribal dynamics as being challenges to their operation, particularly as they impacted women's activism. They also described the local community as being wary of civil society due to a perception of being tied to foreign actors and a belief that they have hidden agendas in favor of political actors.

Like the wariness expressed by other respondents in south and south-central governorates, organizations that supported the protests framed their support as conditional on "preserving society and guiding protestors to respect the law and not infringe on it".⁷⁷ Others described their role in more detail, including in creating protest artwork and memorializing the fallen protestors.⁷⁸

An activist from an agricultural and environmental organization in Qadissiyah describes how civil society improved under the crises that the country faced:

Civil society changed for the better especially during the time that the ISIS-gangs entered Iraq and many citizens had to flee their governorates and come to Qadissiyah, and also in the period of the spread of the Covid-19 virus, we found groups of youths that gave a lot to those who needed support.⁷⁹

There are 152 registered organizations in Qadissiyah, and the most popular specializations are human rights, humanitarian aid, and culture.

3.14 Salahaddin

Salahaddin governorate lies north of Baghdad and shares a border with Ninewa Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk and Diyala governorates from the north and east as well as with Anbar from the west. It is an agricultural governorate, with Tikrit as its capital, and Samara as its largest city.

Although it has a predominantly Arab Sunni population, Salahaddin also has significant Kurdish and Shi'a Turkmen areas. Tuz Khurmato, a mixed Kurdish and Turkmen district, is one of the disputed territories of northern Iraq. Moreover, Samara contains the Al-Askariyan Shrine, a Shi'a holy shrine and pilgrimage site which was bombed by terrorists in 2006 and 2007, at the height of the civil war. Although the city and its surrounding area is predominantly Sunni Arab, it has been controlled by Shi'a armed groups for years, creating a tense security environment. When ISIS invaded northern Iraq, it was able to capture the northern regions of the governorate and the city of Tikrit but was unable to advance onto Samara. ISIS was also unable to take the small Shi'a Turkmen town of Amirli, which was able to withstand a weeks-long siege until the Iraqi Army was able to breach the encirclement.

As it stands, the governorate requires reconstruction and reconciliation work but faces difficulties due to the multiple political and armed actors that have taken an interest in different communities within it. Despite this, civil society in the governorate can only be described as vibrant and active, with those registered operating in the realms of sustainable development, relief, women's affairs, and human rights. As with Ninewa and Anbar governorates, the organizations registered (a total of 110) should be examined while keeping in mind that significant swathes of the governorate was not under the GOI for years, and indeed there is a lull in registration in Salahaddin between 2014 and 2017.

The research team described Salahaddin as the only governorate in which most of the respondents not only had a positive view and relationship with the local and federal government, but also expressed an appreciation for the NGO Directorate itself, saying "the directorate is good and supportive, and the registration period took three months due to the routine procedures."⁸⁰ For reference, other NGOs elsewhere in Iraq reported an average of six to nine months for registration, with some outliers citing two or more years.

⁷⁷ Diwaniya interview 13. June 2021.

⁷⁸ Diwaniya interview 82. June 2021.

⁷⁹ Diwaniya interview 18. June 2021.

⁸⁰ Salahaddin interview 23. June 2021.

With regards to protests, many of the NGOs said that they had tried protesting in their own cities before (referring to previous protest waves from 2011 and 2015) and that the result was “disastrous”. They also described the security situation in their governorate as being “difficult” and that they did not support or participate in any protest because of their difficult experience with ISIS.

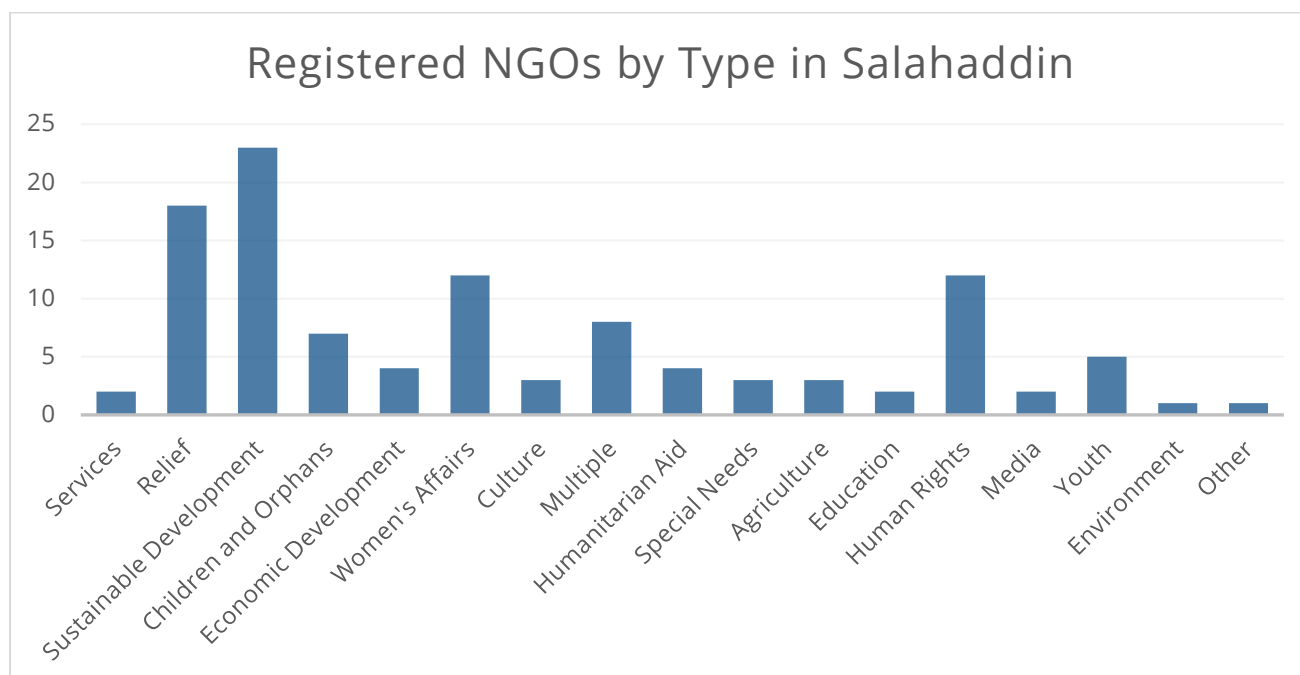


Figure 17

Most organizations that were interviewed were open and willing to speak to researchers and expressed a desire to participate in capacity building workshops from international organizations.

When asked to reflect on the nature of civil society in their governorate, one relief organization explained that it “of course changed because the change that started in the country in 2003 gave organizations a chance in addition to the migration and the ISIS invasion in our area, which encouraged us to pursue civil society in order to help and support our people in Salahaddin.”⁸¹

The NGOs interviewed describe a spirit of “cooperation, friendliness and brotherhood” amongst the various organizations that operate in the governorate, manifesting in shared activities and workshops.⁸²

At the same time, many interviewees complained that many politicized organizations (which tended to appear during election time and disappear after) were able to capitalize on many grants and opportunities through their connections.

3.15 Wasit

Wasit is a governorate in south-eastern Iraq along the border with Iran. Like Dhi Qar and Maysan, it contains some of the marshes and is home to mainly Shi’a Arabs as well as Feyli Kurds. Like many other governorates in the region, it is an agricultural area with a small population. In fact, there are only 84 organizations registered across the governorate, operating chiefly in humanitarian aid, human rights, and youth.

The research team noted difficulties in accessing organizations in Wasit. Among those we spoke with, they complained of a politicization of civil society space in their governorate that has discouraged community members

⁸¹ Salahaddin interview 30. June 2021.

⁸² Salahaddin interview 23. June 2021.

from volunteering. They also complained about poor relations with the local and federal governments and predation by politicized organizations who monopolize available opportunities for civil society.

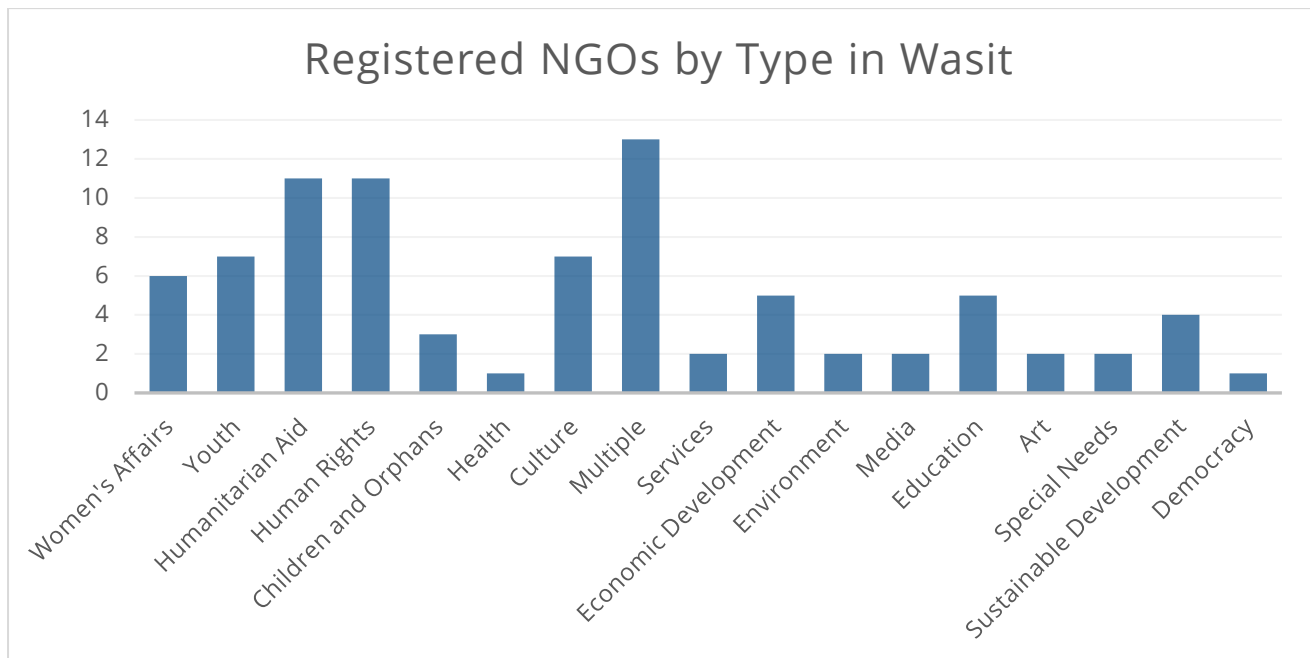


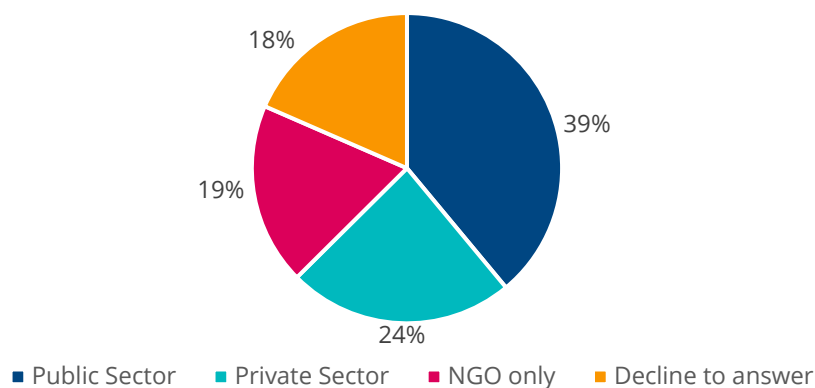
Figure 18

Residents of Wasit governorate had participated in the October Protest Movement, owing to a high poverty and unemployment rate and protestors suffered deaths and injuries because of this participation. Like other areas in south and south-central Iraq, the security environment surrounding the protest movement discouraged NGOs from speaking frankly. When asked about the protests, many openly declined to comment, insisting it was unrelated to civil society.

4 Conclusions about Iraqi Civil Society

The governorate-level observations described above, as well as findings from the survey, can be summarized into seven conclusions that provide insights to the nature of civil society in Iraq. The first of these concerns the relationship of civil society with the state. Many members of NGO boards of directors are employed in the public sector, which is unsurprising as the government is the biggest employer in Iraq. The chart below shows how common public employment is among the NGO board members. This relationship demonstrates that the line between civil society and the state can be blurred in small ways, as many public servants are involved in civil society.

Employment of NGO Board of Directors

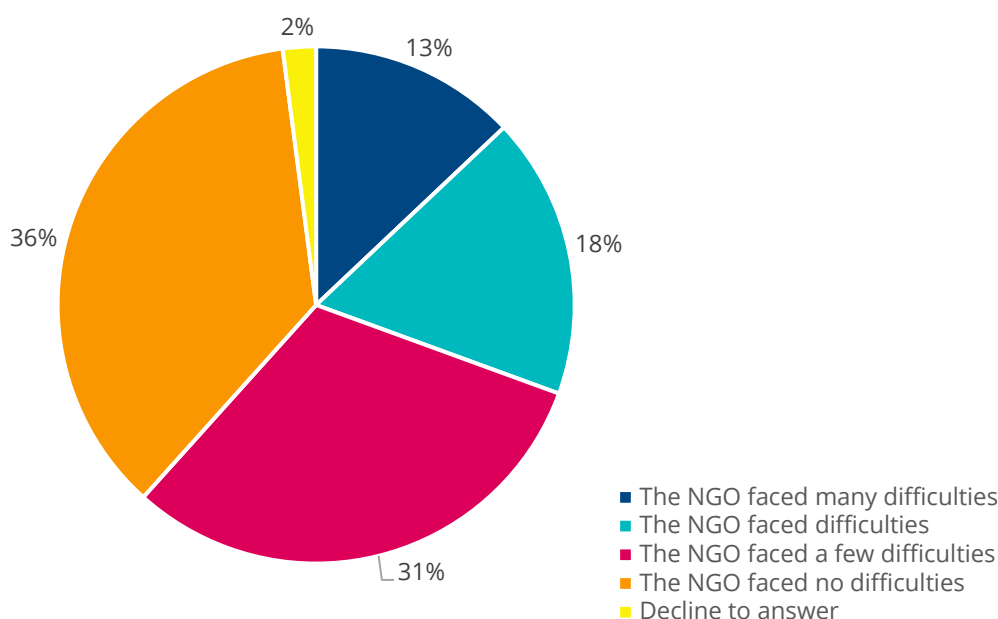


Secondly, single-mandate organizations focusing on specific goals and specializations appear to be more effective and enduring than organizations that try to tackle multiple causes at once. In the surveys, many organizations checked off multiple categories when asked about their sector, and in the individual governorate-level graphs, the category “multiple” is seen often. However, this also suggests that the current categorization used by the NGO Directorate to describe civil society in Iraq may be lacking and perhaps requires revisions.

Third, security concerns are heightened throughout the country, though for different reasons. In the south and south-central, NGOs were more cautious of being interviewed because of the proliferation of armed actors and the increased predation on activists. In areas liberated from ISIS, organizations’ security concerns were heightened in more diverse and contested areas where multiple armed actors competed for influence.

All the organizations interviewed and surveyed viewed registration with the NGO Directorate as being a necessary step and all value their legal status. In addition, most organizations reported several months as the time it took to register their organization with the NGO directorate and most described the process as involving “no difficulties” or “a few difficulties”. The organizations that took the longest registration times tended to be ones that required permissions from outside the NGO Directorate. For example, one organization that works across Iraq on de-mining reported requiring permissions from the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Environment and National Security, thereby requiring two years to register.⁸³ From their end, the NGO Directorate has made registration a one-time process that does not require renewal, but only the necessary legal annual auditing reports to ensure the organization’s operation. They have also organized in-house capacity building programs as well as cooperated with international organizations to support the development of organizations.⁸⁴

Did Your NGO Face any Difficulties in Registering?



Fifth, NGOs across most governorates complained about tribes and tribal customs as being key challenges that face the development and work of civil society organizations, particularly because they block many women from volunteering. In addition, tribes also limit the types of activities and initiatives organizations can plan for women in the governorate. They describe this as a challenge at a local level, meaning that it operates across each governorate. Baghdad and Ninewa governorates reported this challenge less often than other governorates did.

⁸³ Baghdad interview 25. April 2021.

⁸⁴ Author interview with NGO Directorate official, Baghdad, March 2021.

Sixth and in general, NGOs across all governorates reported having a relationship with the local government, albeit frequently described as “moral support” (and not “material support”) more so than with the federal government. The contrast of “moral” and “material” support comes from an expectation among some organizations that the state is responsible for financially supporting organizations.

Finally, many promising organizations in the south and south central depend largely on internal donations or, sometimes entirely on the beneficence of the founder. This limits their ability to grow as does their lack of skills when it comes to seeking out international support and applying to it. All the organizations welcome and are eager for international support whether monetary or in capacity building but suffer from their inability to access it. They view the region as being neglected by international organizations and for the neglect to have worsened because of the post ISIS reconstruction of other regions. As an example, an activist from Qadissiyah said that the only international organization that had a sustained presence in the governorate was UNICEF (which is now no longer working there).

Organizations in Iraq tend to be either self-financed (the most sophisticated version of this is membership fees) or to rely on international aid, with only a few relying on local donations from local elites (e.g. businessman, clerical establishment, political parties). The organizations that are self-financed have largely expressed a desire to be recognized by international organizations but are unable to do so due to the lack of capacity. There is a belief that the public should contribute to civil society through voluntarism, but not as much through donations, except for charity groups.

Taken together, these conclusions indicate both a certain coherence amongst organizations in Iraq, as well as a similarity in concerns and challenges that makes studying civil society as a cohesive unit possible in the country. At the same time, this report was severely impeded by the securitization of the country, particularly in the south and south central and the proliferation of armed groups that are outside of the state’s direct control. The goal of the report was to provide a birds-eye view of civil society in Iraq and describing the security challenges in the data collection allows future researchers to set their expectations, as well as to anticipate the nature of challenges that they will face.

There is much space for additional research in Iraq, including a similar project in the Kurdistan region as well as several sub-national projects that examine the development of local civil societies. The goal of this report was to demonstrate the complexity of the CSO landscape and the local level dynamics between civil society and the various authorities, be it governmental, religious, or tribal.

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