

The Ground Truth

Civil Society in Iraq: An Interview with Rahman Aljebouri

Rahman Aljebouri is the Senior Program Officer for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) with a focus on Iraq and the Gulf states. He supports capacity building efforts that help local civil society institutions promote democracy. He oversees local initiatives implemented by local partners that empower citizens, monitor human rights and hold governments accountable to their own citizens.

The views in this interview do not necessarily reflect the policies of the NED. The views are solely the opinion of Rahman Aljebouri as a civil society activist.

epic: How would you define civil society? How, in general, should Americans try to visualize civil society?

Rahman: It's hard. You use that language here but the idea is still developing in Iraq. A lot of mosques are part of civil society in Iraq. It's like the churches here [in the United States]. I'm not talking about a legal definition because there are still no laws to define them in Iraq. Here you have 501(c)3 tax exempt status for certain kinds of NGOs—this is non-existent in Iraq. There are however social movement in Iraq. At the same time, the idea of an independent civil society is still developing. I feel that it is whoever is working for the public benefit and is not part of the Iraqi government or the political party system. As long as they are not with only one political party, they are not with only one school of thought, I would be happy to call them civil society. We have a problem in Iraq where you go to the parliament, you talk to them about civil society, and they say, "I have five, ten civil society organizations working with me." It's fine to have a few organizations aligned with you, but not if they are basically just going to follow the MP's own agenda. These are organizations who are not helping people from outside of their own political party.

I think with civil society there are public benefits, they have relations with the community, they are people who represent the needs of the community, they want to communicate the needs of the community to the policy makers. It is not interest groups. It is the voice of the people.

Legally, to define civil society you have to follow whatever the NGO law is in the country. Although, some organizations, for example, make special cases for Iraqi organizations

that for whatever reason cannot register. I think there are a lot of minority organizations that are not getting registered, but we still have to support them as long as they are operating as an institution, as long as there is a board that makes decisions for the institution.

epic: Could you tell us a little bit about the history of civil society in Iraq? What was civil society like under Saddam?

Rahman: I don't think there were real institutions of civil society because there was only one political party, all the institutions belonged to that political party. There were institutions that carried the propaganda of that one political party. There used to be a lot of labor unions, a women's union, these were made up of members of the Ba'ath party. But for individuals, yes, the whole idea is not really new. But the practice is new. When I was in college, we had a student union, but the student unionists were chosen by the political party, they were tools of the political party, an arm of the political party. I could not be from the opposition and be on the student union.

My friend and I talking together, wanting to build an organization that advocated for a change of policy in the Iraqi government, would go to jail for that. On the other hand, if you look at the laws, they were progressive—I was honestly surprised by it. Professional associations laws in the early 60s



Rahman was forced to flee Iraq in 1991. Since then, he has served as the Iraqi Community Coordinator for the Iraq Foundation in Washington, D.C. There, he facilitated advocacy campaigns on behalf of the Iraqi community in the United States with local and state governments.

He then worked as the National Democratic Institute's Deputy Country Director and Director of Civil Society and Election Program in Iraq. There he provided training to hundreds of civic and political party activists. He helped design and implement the NDI Civic Dialogue program and helped launch the NGO League, a network of more than 100 NGOs; the Iraqi Election Information Network (EIN) which monitored the last two elections and referendum; and Mirat Media, a monitoring network that is playing a leading role in monitoring the Iraqi government.

and early 70s were so progressive. But it's not the law, it's the practice. I'm not against any organization that existed before Saddam, or even during Saddam's time, as long as they are a real institution, and not a front for Saddam's people.

Iraqi culture knows the institutions of civil society, but it's about the practice. The culture is there, we want to steer it to the right practice. Organization-wise, training-wise, somebody brought me—because we were basically doing a lot of political party training—somebody came and gave me a manual to read and I read it, and it basically explained what we did. Afterwards, he told me it was the manual for political party training for the Ba'ath party in 1970. It was about the practice.

epic: What are the threats to civil society? Could you talk a little bit about the draft CSO (Civil Society Organizations) law?

Rahman: You need space for civil society to do their work legally, and the draft NGO law is horrible. The worst part of it is that it was written under the umbrella of the UN, so even the Iraqi government, when you talk to them, says "the UN is fine with it, why aren't you?" It is still a struggle because the government doesn't know what to do with civil society.

We need to be careful about that kind of NGO law. As an example, in the current draft of the NGO law that I saw, if I as an Iraqi citizen want to give \$100 to an NGO, I first have to go to Baghdad to petition the NGO Assistance Office to allow me to give the \$100, then I have to go home to wait for them to give me permission or not. If they permit me to give \$100, I would have already spent \$2,000 between a hotel and transportation to give \$100, so I might not give it. Those are resources. So we are cutting resources with the NGO law.

The other threat is the international institutions themselves. They force Iraqi civil society to do specific projects designed outside of the country and just give money to NGOs to implement those projects. It might kill the whole civil society movement because then the community might see civil society as agents from the outside. As I said, they are opening a huge gap between civil society and the community themselves. It is like, if I'm in a community, I want to see the people in civil society on the same financial level as me. When I see civil society personnel at a much higher financial level, I

don't want to support them.

We need to get Iraqis to understand the idea of working together democratically as an institution. We need to help them be institutional, we need to hold them accountable, not just have them hold the government accountable. You know, that's another threat within the system itself, within civil society. If you don't give them the time to mature, then democracy within the institutions themselves won't be there. That's another challenge for civil society.

Definitely, sometimes we outsiders, like funders and governments, are pushing some topics that are very sensitive for the society. There are things that can wait. In one proposal I received last cycle, one of the women's organizations wanted to do gender equality analysis of the budget. Great thing. I would be happy to support that project ten years from now. Because first, the Iraqi parliament is not discussing the budget themselves, the MPs don't know the budget themselves. The NGO has no capacity or people who really know this topic. But you know what happens, they go outside the country, someone from the NGO did a workshop on this, somebody told them there is money on this. So they came back, wrote a proposal and sent it in.

Just saying there is money inside Iraq for civil society, I think you will kill civil society, honestly. Right away, you will kill civil society. The Iraqi NGOs that the U.S. supports and the Iraqi NGOs that the UN supports will not get money from the Iraqi government.

But how is that going to be implemented? Honestly, they don't know. You need to choose the right topic for the right time. Somebody sent me a proposal about child soldiers in Iraq. It's not a problem in Iraq, it is not, honestly. Militia is different from child soldiers. People on the outside need to be less aggressive on these topics right now. Either the topics they propose do not exist or there is no capacity to deal with them. Somebody wants to hold militia accountable, but how do you hold militia accountable? They are killing people, do you want go ask them where they are getting their money from? Come on, we need to focus our efforts. That is another challenge.

The financial challenge. You need to be sure there is a channel for the money for them. Money needs to be available for NGOs both internally and from outside the country. Also you need to be sure the money goes to the right NGOs. These are the challenges. Skills building, legal framework, resources, these are the challenges. Also, maybe there needs to be a network to protect the activists themselves. I don't think there is a network right now, so that if a civil society leader or journalist was arrested, there would be an advocacy campaign to show that these people are threatened by the government.

These are the challenges, a combination of challenges facing Iraqi civil society.

epic: In what ways can we continue to support Iraqi civil society?

Rahman: I think there are two ways to address these things. First, pressure the Iraqi government to create a legal structure so there is money for civil society and second, that the money is not controlled by the government or by whichever sectarian division is in control at the moment. A structure is needed like a commission that would report to the Iraqi parliament so there is some money available from inside Iraq.

But we would have to be very careful with a body like that right now, because of all of the political divisions. First you would need to get commissioners on that body, if there were such body, who are really independent, who have worked in this field, who would know what grant making is, who would know the rules. To be activists themselves; to build this institution in the community.

I think the U.S. and the international community could help, because we need to balance—let us assume a commission exists—we need also to balance the money coming from outside the country so that Iraqi NGOs, who for some reason are not getting their money from the commission because of their political activities or they don't want to belong to the Iraqi government or whatever, they can still go and get money from outside the country.

Iraq is not going to be like the US where you will see foundations that can give money in the arts. You won't see that in Iraq because the mentality, the culture is that you go to the mosques to give; they are not going to go to an endowment or trust to give money to civil society. You need to balance money from outside the country and inside the country.

Just saying there is money inside Iraq for civil society, I think you will kill civil society, honestly. Right away, you will kill civil society. The Iraqi NGOs that U.S. supports and the Iraqi NGOs that the UN supports will not get money from the Iraqi government. I'll give some examples. The Iraqi government now has some money for organizations and when they start giving this money away, they divide the money according to sectarian divisions. "We need that much for the Kurdish organizations, that much for the Sunni organizations." And when they give it, they never give it to one single civil society organization with a political mission. They all give it to charity. Charity is part of civil society, but it is not the part of civil society that we are seeking to aid. So that's the danger of saying the money is there in Iraq.

epic: How does USAID work with civil society and how would potential USAID reform affect civil society?

Rahman: It is hard to fix the way USAID does things. USAID does bring something to the table. Definitely there are things that USAID does that you don't want to take away, like construction in projects dealing with water and sewage, and give them to a democracy organization. There are things that USAID is doing well. Keep those with them. But don't ask the USAID contractor because they are there and can fix a bridge and say, "by the way, can you do democracy?"

USAID basically has the US government agenda. If you're from USAID working on political parties, you want to teach them the American system. We don't want to give them just the American system. It's wonderful for us here in this country, but it wouldn't always work for other people, other cultures. You want to give people other experiences. Tell them about other systems, let people choose. If they choose the American model, wonderful. But it's not my position to push the American system down their throat.

We still have problems with the money going from the U.S. to Iraqi civil society. Much of it seems contractual and the contracts are simply to implement goals set by USAID or by whoever is giving the money.

My problem with that is we are not helping build civil society with a mission, we are building a culture in civil society that is used to contracts. The contracts, especially through PRTs (Provincial Response Teams), serve the goals of the funder and suddenly there is a huge gap between the communities and the Iraqi NGOs themselves. Their communities don't see them respond to the problems within the community, instead they see them respond to the funder.

Here at the National Endowment for Democracy, we have given grants three or four times to improve the image of new civil society institutions in the eyes of Iraqis. For them to say in effect, "look, not all of us follow just the interests of the funder, some of us are doing what our communities need." Frequently, money in contracts also has no strategic vision, like where are the NGOs going to be in five years?

Money is important for Iraq. Money from the U.S. is important. It is also important for us here in the U.S. to show our commitment is more than just the military. We always talk about how not much thought went into the military operation before we went in. But why make the same mistake right now with the civilian side?

We have the time to say, look, we don't want to waste a lot of money. What NED did, as an example, even when the budg-

et was cut to \$2 million, was very influential in Iraq because the NED knows the Iraqi NGOs well. This shows NGOs that if they're accountable, if they're doing their job, NED is always with them.

Iraqi NGOs don't want to be accountable to the military or PRTs—and the monitoring is not there. Projects that NED supports with \$25,000, a PRT would give them three or four times that with no accountability. Still, after five years, not many Iraqi NGOs can handle large amounts of money; they are still new organizations. Yes, they can do the activities, but not as institutions with responsibilities for budgets and accounting. And the PRT funding will come for six months, but what about later? You can reach more NGOs with \$25,000 if you do it smartly.

epic: What is the best way for the U.S. government to support Iraqi civil society?

Rahman: I think one of the best ways is for Congress to fund the State Department. Then the State Department channels funding to organizations with a history of working with civil society, organizations that are known for their democracy work. They are more accountable within the U.S., which is important. They have the institutional knowledge and have people who have worked on this.

I have worked on both sides, in Iraq and the U.S. If I were in charge of the money, I would give it to the State Department and the grant makers rather than to USAID. Even giving to USAID is better than going to a PRT, but how is USAID going to work in Iraq after PRTs and the contractor culture? There won't be many contractors after the military leaves. Where is USAID going to spend the money? So give it to the channels that are known for this kind of work. You can hold them accountable, they in turn can hold their partners accountable. I have 60 NGO partners, so if there is one bad apple, I still have 59 good apples that outweigh the bad one. I'm not going to hurt that much if \$25,000 gets wasted, not as much if I gave \$2 million to someone who just disappears.

epic: How can we help civil society become self-sustaining?

Rahman: It's not going to happen right away. It has to be gradual. It will be ten years, maybe fifteen years from now. It will require helping Iraqis mobilize their people and en-

courage volunteerism. That is that only way we can cut our funding for Iraqi NGOs, when we feel people can take it on their own. We have to help them find that culture, because honestly, that culture does not exist there. We have to do it little bit by little bit.

It is hard to hire and keep somebody and pay them a salary of \$500 a month when some contractors pay them a salary of \$3000 a month. If somebody feels he can get a job for more than \$500, he will do the job and keep volunteering for civil society. But \$3000 is not an easy salary to get in Iraq—how do we get people to volunteer if they can get more money for it.

epic: How do Iraqi civil society organizations get funding now?

We always talk about how not much thought went into the military operation before we went in. But why make the same mistake right now on the civilian side?

Rahman: There are not many Iraqi NGOs that have access to outside funds from non-Iraqi institutions. Not many. And not many organizations fund Iraqi civil society. All the funds for civil society right now are channeled through the US government or the UN. And the US government and the UN, both of them are working on specific programs around the elections. Most of the money spent for the last five years has been on projects like elections.

So suddenly, if there were no funds for elections, how would NGOs get new money? Their contact with the outside world of funders is minimal. Iraqi organizations can't go to Europe, and educate potential funders about their projects. They cannot get visas. They cannot even get visas for other neighboring countries except maybe Turkey or Lebanon, and normally there is no funder sitting in Turkey and Lebanon. So how am I as an Iraqi NGO, going to go to the international community?

You need maybe the international community helping Iraqi NGOs go and meet private funders, so they can at least advocate on behalf of their organization. I doubt a lot of international or private institutions are sending their people to Iraq to explain to Iraqis, "this is who we are, this is what we fund." I haven't heard of any Iraqi NGOs supported by the big private institutions like the Ford Foundation or the Open Society Institute. It is only through government channels of some embassies, or the UN, or the U.S. that money gets to Iraqi civil society. A lot of private institutions in the U.S. and in Europe don't want to work in Iraq because they have no way to monitor how their money is used.

If you want it to be sustainable, it takes time. It's not going to be tomorrow. That's why we have a moral responsibility in Iraq. We thought the military operation would end in two years, three years, five years, but the democracy process is not two or three years. It is not an operation you can "win." You need to build a culture for it. And culture is not going to happen overnight, or in one workshop where you teach people how to establish an organization and that's it.

What I have seen in Iraq in five years has been a maturity of civil society that I haven't seen in ten, fifteen years in other countries—which is great. So there is some progress that is happening but we don't want to stop it right now and say, "oh yeah, you know how to go to the parliament now, that's it, we're not going to support you." These needs need to be taken seriously, honestly.

I would say, you know, we need fund civil society for the next fifteen years. At least. If, after fifteen years, the government in Iraq is much better than the government right now, they have a system to fund NGOs, if the money is there, if Iraq is giving to civil society across sectarian divisions, then we might see it differently. We might see some of the leaders in civil society right now get elected to the parliament, get into the government, and they themselves are making that appeal for money from the inside. But we need these NGOs to mature, we need them to build credibility, we need them to be in places they can make decisions on this before we tell them "Hey, it's all done. We taught you what we know and that's it."

In the early days of 2003, 2004 in Iraq, civil society was thought of more in terms of charity organizations because everybody from the international community thought that basically all Iraq would need was charity. When they went there, they found charity is not the issue in Iraq. And definitely after one month, there was no need for food aid. Then suddenly, every organization in Iraq was working on human rights. I wouldn't have to ask any organization what their name was. Everyone had human rights in the name, it just changed by where you were—Baghdadi Human Rights Organization, Hillah Human Rights Organization.

Now, within five years, we've seen organizations start working on specific issues. Capacity building, or working with the parliament, or on accountability. You find some of them saying, "No thank you, contractors, human rights is not my field, can you go to this organization?" And that's maturity. If you have someone coming to you with money and you say, "no thanks, I'm not a humanitarian," or "I don't do agriculture, it is not my field," that's because the civil society we're seeing feels there are resources now and there will be resources in

the future. But if they start to see the resources dry up, they could go back to their old ways.

epic: Do you see the maturation process continuing?

Rahman: Honestly, if you had talked to any organization in 2004, 2005, 2006 about doing advocacy at the parliament, getting involved in drafting laws, or holding the local councils accountable, they would have started laughing at you. "Come on, we're not going to do that, just give us the money, we'll put 25 people in a class, we'll talk to them about the UDHR, we'll talk to them about CEDAW, we'll have lunch, and we'll leave." There was no follow-up. Now it's totally different. People are targeted: "I want to work on capacity building, don't ask me to do other things." Or other organizations that only want to work on getting citizen input on draft laws. So you find people saying "Okay, our target is not the grassroots, our target is the parliament, so we work with the parliament, but we also take what the grassroots thinks to the parliament." So you see more maturity.

Last year, and I thought this might come in ten years, we started seeing think tanks. When you go to other Arab countries in the region, there are few think tanks. I could see the seeds of think tanks in Iraq last year. They matured locally, they started locally, the initiative was local.

On one of my visits to Baghdad, my assistant said there was a panel at the Sheraton Hotel about what Iraqi citizenship is, how we define Iraqi citizens. I went there and it was like a typical seminar in Washington, DC; a lot of highly educated people, very organized, and I asked who supported them, like from outside the country. They said no one, so I asked how they paid for it and they said they had volunteer professors from universities, others, and one of the guys had a printing house, so they got basic support.

Now they give a lot of policy advice to parliament, they have moved their seminars from the hotel to the parliament building. Few institutions have that kind of access. We need to support them and others like them. Ideally, we want NGOs to do this on their own, but support won't hurt them.

If you put \$20 million into civil society, I think the outcome of this will be better than if we spent that on other things.

epic: The outside institutions that are setting priorities, who are those organizations?

Rahman: The UN, USAID. Part of it is that even if you as a funder are in Iraq, you are not with the NGO community. They come to you. You are not there in the community, seeing their needs. You are not there to help them design their

project, coming in after an assessment of the needs of the community. The project is already written. I worked with a lot of international organizations, a lot of committee work, where the projects were already designed. I could show you some of the proposals written by international organizations, you just plug-in the numbers. They don't teach Iraqi NGOs how to at least write their own proposals. That's a threat to civil society.

A lot of proposals get rejected because the Iraqi NGOs submit the same proposal they wrote for the contractors. They use the same numbers, they change the name of the institution they send it to, but they don't change what's in the proposal. So that's kind of the culture of the international organizations—having Iraqi NGOs do projects of the international organization. They are not helping civil society, they are not building civil society, they are doing their own business in Iraq under the veil of civil society. That's one of the most dangerous things, worse than no money. I'd prefer to work with ten organizations that are committed rather than work in the culture of numbers.

What comes out of it? How many international workers, under so much pressure, can change the culture of their institution? Because if you're under pressure, you just want to put people in the room. You're not worried about what kind of dialog will be in the room, what you're promoting in the room. You're just worried about taking a picture and sending it to your superiors. And if that's working on civil society, then this is not going to build a civil society, this is not the way.

Civil society building is a process. I sometimes consider it like a professional sport. You are 19 years old, you get \$20 million a year, and suddenly after your career is over when you're 35, suddenly we see you in the news in bankruptcy because there is no system to teach you how to be a millionaire and use your brain. No, you spend, spend, spend, and then everybody is looking for their money in court. And that's exactly what will happen in civil society if it's not built in the right way and we're not working with the right people.

We need to channel funding through institutions that have experience dealing with civil society—not just in Iraq, in other countries where they've seen it. Definitely Latin American civil society is more mature than the Arab world and with a lot of similarity. An organization that has been working with

Latin American civil society for ten years on human rights in Latin America could use that institutional knowledge when working on other areas of the world, like Iraq. This is what's different when you have the luxury of institutional history working on this.

epic: We've seen the US cutting money for civil society in Iraq on paper. Have you seen the effects of those cuts?

Rahman: Of course. We went from a \$70 million budget in 2004, to now our budget is \$2 million including our administrative costs. You would expect after five years our budget would increase because we're working on democracy now, not in 2003.

Look at the quality of the Iraqi organizations working now. We talk about sectarianism, but if you go to these NGOs, whoever they are, wherever they're from, you'll see they sit and talk and work together. One organization's leader is in

Mosul, and one of his best friends is from the South. And that's the last thing you expect, with the politics in Iraq, Sunni and Shi'a, but everyday, they're on the phone, asking about each other's projects on accountability, talking about how they can help each other. I don't think there are any Iraqi political figures on the phone asking how they can work together instead of sitting on negotiation and shouting at each other.

If you put \$20 million into civil society, I think the outcome of this will be better than if we spent that on other things.

The money should get back to building democracy. There is a shrink in the military presence, but there should be a bigger budget for peace, for these peaceful institutions. The need is different, too. You're cutting budgets to \$2 million, and where in the early days I could give \$10,000 to NGOs, now their projects are bigger than \$10,000. When you're building an advocacy campaign for the whole country, you cannot do it for \$10,000. The focus and the topics right now are bigger than just putting ten people in one room. It's not civic education any more, it is policy work. It is accountability, the real democracy things. It is people working on alternative media. How am I going to compete against a militia and their media with \$10,000?

I want to see more resources for the organizations that do this work. Empower them. If there is work for democracy in Iraq, it has just started. It has just started right now. It has started and we need to put the resources there. The funding for democracy should come now. Democracy should come

now.

There is a lot of hope in Iraqi democracy. Iraq can be an example to the whole area. We already have a good story to tell about democracy in the Middle East in Iraq. Civil society is how we got there, not any thing else. If civil society can show that progress in five years, imagine if it has the resources for ten years.

One thing we didn't talk about is the shifting of resources to Afghanistan. We don't want to make the mistake we did in Afghanistan. We had a lot of resources in Afghanistan before, then we shifted to Iraq. Now we have to go back. We don't want to have to go back to Iraq in ten years to do the same thing. We need to continue to do the work in Iraq and not abandon Iraq like we abandoned Afghanistan. We'd have to start from scratch again. We cannot keep jumping from a hotspot here to a hotspot there and shifting to a new hotspot.

epic: Can you talk a little about what the civil society organizations that you work with do on the ground?

Rahman: Whatever the democracy work, we leave the topic up to them. We are here to give them the resources that they need. In the last grant making cycle we had 70 projects. They cover over 20 topics. But I had nothing to do with choosing the topics. Some organizations do human rights, women's empowerment, accountability, civic education, some doing polling, others are doing think tanks, and giving alternative feedback to the parliament.

Some work on the early stages of drafting laws, so they bring in experts and citizens, sit, read the draft, give feedback on the draft and meet with the parliament. A lot of them do legislative advocacy. I think this topic will become very important for the next four years with the new parliament and there are a lot of laws still to be drafted. There is a lot of accountability on the local level. You're bringing the citizens, the local agencies, the local legislators together to plan and talk about things. It encourages the culture of questioning government, questioning your elected officials.

Most of our projects are mixed. Of course there is also a lot of capacity building. Some NGOs are doing training for other NGOs, building their financial systems, their strategic planning, building their advocacy tools. This is long-term thinking. If ultimately the funding is not there and if the big organizations are not going to work in Iraq, at least we are leaving the legacy for some Iraqi NGOs to do this work to

build the capacity of other Iraqi organizations, so they don't have to wait for help to come from outside of the country.

We have a few organizations in Kurdistan monitoring the work of the parliament, monitoring the work of the ministries. We have three, four organizations working on the judiciary part of it, helping judges to be independent, monitoring the court systems, doing legal education. I think we have 55 partners in different categories. As I said, we did not tell any of them "go do this."

Last year, actually, we gave a grant to one of our partners to make a strategic plan for the next three years. So they pulled together 25 organizations and sat together to think strategically what they want to do on topics. Like, if you're a women's empowerment organization, what do you want to do in the next five years, what are the things you need, what are the things you can share with others, what is your organization lacking that other organizations have? We also did it by region to support informal networks within the regions—what are the things you want to do on a regional level and what do you want to work on at the national level?

One of the things that came out of it was the NGO law, they wanted to work on it nationally. When the government and the parliament started working on the draft, I think a lot of international NGO funders went and gave money to work on the draft NGO law.

Iraqi organizations are doing advocacy without outside help, too. One network of NGOs went and led a lot of advocacy campaigns at the parliament, at the government. They said, this is what we ourselves work on and why it needs to change.

I saw when I was in Iraq in 2003, 2004 and later a lot of programs that were designed outside of the country. Human rights monitoring is wonderful, but you could not monitor human rights at that time—the people will send you a report, but the real work and research was non-existent. Just for them to feel comfortable and safe, and also legally be able to go and monitor jail was non-existent. If I'm not allowed to go in the jail, why are you giving me a grant to monitor jail? I'm not allowed, I'm not allowed to talk to the police.

Now, you'll find two NGOs, one in Tikrit, one in Kirkuk, doing human rights education for the police members. They got an invitation from the police chief in Salahuddin saying "come teach us." One NGO developed a human rights curriculum that is now taught at the police academy in Kirkuk.

So these come naturally. They want it, they want to learn about human rights, they become partners. So it's an equal partnership. This is not the internationals telling me to go somewhere and do monitoring. I might not be welcomed there to do monitoring. And as an Iraqi civil society institution, I'm not going to send the money back --I'm going to write the report and send it to the funders.

So that's exactly where, again, money should go to the people with a lot of flexibility. Not all going to projects on elections and then you find 500 Iraqi organizations working on elections and none working accountability.

epic: How did you get interested in civil society work?

Rahman: I've been a political activist for a long time, even before all of this happened. I was a community organizer in the refugee camps in 1991, and I came here as a political organizer. By training I am a teacher and I think that's normal, natural for me, I want to give back. I could be sitting in the Iraqi parliament or the Iraqi government if I wanted, but this seemed like the place I could be most useful. I can give to more people. I'm not partisan here. Building institutions is better than being a part of an institution. I can see how many people I helped in the institution, how many people I helped be in the Iraqi parliament.

If you want to be part of something good, you should give to everybody, you should be a resource to everybody. I'm more comfortable being a resource to everybody rather than being the leader. I could call 50, 80 Iraqi MPs right now and they will discuss what I want to talk to them about. I think that's a much more powerful message than being one of them. They don't see me as a competitor; they don't see me challenging them. They see me as a resource.

There are some people who want to be leaders and be in government or in parliament. There are leaders who want to work among the people. I would like to work with the people because it gives me more access to the people than being an Iraqi Minister sitting in the Green Zone or in the Iraqi parliament. It is great to see other people adopting your ideas and you can be helpful to them rather than spending time promoting yourself. I want to set the example for these NGOs that we're working for them, not them for us.

I feel this moral responsibility, as an Iraqi-American, to get the resources to the right people. In five, ten years, I've already seen the NGOs I worked with in Iraq, they are leaders now. That has fulfilled what I wanted to do. I could be a minister, but you cannot change the system while inside the system.

I have friend who became the first Iraqi human rights minister. When he talked to me I said, "don't take the job, don't take the job." Whoever is in that job cannot listen to the activists. If you are a human rights minister in the government, you're not going to go against your boss, the Prime Minister. You'll find yourself always giving a good reason for why he or she has done this. And then you lose your leadership and credibility. I told him, if we want to build a democratic society, let us build it when we're not in government. Because people will listen to us, people will see that we don't have a stake in it. We really want good for our people. But if I'm sitting in the Green Zone as a minister and

I want to convince people that things are great and they are suffering on the street, it will not work.

Now when I go to Iraq, I can go to the NGOs, I sit with the NGOs, I talk to them, I'm there to guide them and not just to give them money, but to guide them with ideas, guide them about what is next. Because I've seen it from here, from my work. They haven't. Just sitting with an NGO, telling them, look, there is an NGO similar to you in Latin America

or in India, and this is what they accomplished after ten years of work. I tell them "we want you to be around in ten years, we have the commitment to you—don't be a thief, don't be corrupt because don't worry, your salary will be there." But do your work, the work you want to do. Affect your society.

I'm proud of what I did in Iraq, what I still do. I don't want to be one of those idealists, but I feel you go into teaching because you believe in how many people you can educate and make leaders in the future. Civil society is a teaching job, it's the same philosophy of giving to others. That's why I do it, that's my commitment. I'm building a new movement in Iraq. I don't want to be in the picture. I want to be behind, helping these people. You don't want to be the leader, but it's nice to help others be the leaders. That's exactly where I think my role is, identifying the leaders, identifying what they want, and helping them go. Creating 100 leaders to do the job is much better than you doing the job by yourself.

We don't want to have to go back to Iraq in ten years.... We need to continue our work in Iraq and not abandon Iraq like we abandoned Afghanistan.

epic: Are we at a critical point for the future of Iraqi civil society? Or is it no more critical now than it will be three, five years from now?

Rahman: I think we are halfway, honestly. You don't want to teach somebody the basics and then leave them. You taught them the basics for a reason. You taught them the basics so they can build on the basics. To give them the basics and say "that's it," that's not acceptable. Democracy is a process, democracy is not just bringing them into a room and teaching them human rights. You want them to practice this. Now we've reached a level where people practice, now we've reached a level where organizations go to parliament.

But if we stop, they will stop. They are not mature enough where it's a way of life for them. For me it's a way of life. If I didn't have this job, I would go to Iraq and find a way to do this job. For them it's still a struggle.

You want to help them get mature and start seeing the results of their work. Results like respect from the parliament, the community seeing they have real input and they can challenge somebody. We have just seen the first wave of challenging and getting their opinions heard and we don't want to stop here.

Once we start feeling Iraq is democratic, then there will be no need for money from everybody else. That's where the challenge is. If we get the right people in the Iraqi parliament, the right people in the Iraqi government, and see that Iraqi funding is serving civil society, then we won't need money from outside the country. Then my Iraqi NGOs won't need the money anymore from me. But until we reach that level, or close to that level, we need all of us to work toward keeping them going.

The Ground Truth Project is a unique series of interviews with Iraqis, aid workers, returning soldiers, and others who have lived, worked or served in Iraq. By offering perspectives about Iraq that can only be gained from being there, EPIC hopes these interviews will inspire meaningful policy change and citizen action in support of a better future for all Iraqis. To learn more or to subscribe to our newsletter, please visit <http://www.epic-usa.org>. To support the Ground Truth, please visit <http://www.epic-usa.org/donate>.

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