



BRIDGING THE GAP

Evidence on the Links between Civil Society and Good Governance in Iraq

Overview

Iraq has made progress in recent years establishing basic democratic institutions, yet there is much left to be done to consolidate an open, accountable and participatory system of governance. Fueled by political challenges that exacerbate divisions within the country, terrorism has reemerged as a major threat to national stability. However, one important sphere where we are seeing valuable contributions to good governance is through the work of Iraqi civil society. Mercy Corps' latest research on perceptions of governance and civil society in Iraq provides new insights into this link.

This brief elaborates on key findings from Mercy Corps' nationwide civic attitudes and behaviors survey in Iraq. As donors move towards scaling down development assistance to Iraq—now considered a middle-income country—our research concludes that withdrawing support for Democracy and Governance (DG) programs is premature. Doing so is likely to weaken the influence of civil society in Iraq and, in turn, hinder the development of more democratic forms of governance from taking root in this strategic country.

Key Findings and Implications

Our findings indicate that the belief that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are able to influence policy and development outcomes is strongly linked to:

- Higher levels of political efficacy
- Higher assessments of government responsiveness
- And higher assessments of government legitimacy

Given the positive bridging role that civil society can play between citizens and their government, the study advocates for a long-term donor agenda to support Iraqi organizations as a means to improving governance in Iraq.

Background

Since May 2012, what seemed like a turning point in the conflict that engulfed Iraq in 2007 has effectively been reversed. Upwards of 8,000 civilians were killed in a host of terrorist bombings and attacks in 2013, making it the deadliest year since 2008. Thus far, 2014 has failed to see a respite in violence as recent estimates place the civilian death toll over 2,000.¹



Violence and instability are closely related to governance issues in Iraq. Extremist militant groups have exploited political grievances with the governance system to foster violence. There is much riding on national elections in April as the country struggles to build political consensus for a peaceful and more democratic future. Despite many challenges, citizens across the country have peacefully advocated for solutions on a range of issues from the lack of basic services such as electricity, to more fundamental issues of protection of minority rights, participation in decision-making, decentralization, anti-corruption, and access to jobs, health care and education. Civil society organizations and activists are often at the center of these actions, indicating that issues of importance can be addressed through constructive democratic means, especially should the government provide an enabling environment for civic participation.

“Democracy is incomplete in Iraq. Donors are leaving, but we still need support.”

*—Iraqi Civil Society Activist
from Diyala Province*

To address governance challenges in Iraq, Mercy Corps is leading a consortium of four international and two national NGOs to implement the three-year program Broadening Participation through Civil Society (BPCS) with the support of USAID. The program began in late 2012 and will run until late 2015 in all 18 governorates. BPCS builds on eight years of work with civil society and local communities through the Community Action Program (CAP), which began in 2003, when Mercy Corps became operational in Iraq. Through a range of institutional and technical strengthening policy advocacy and media outreach activities the program aims to increase the effectiveness of civil society actors and enhance civic engagement amongst citizens. The basic premise of the BPCS is that these changes can strengthen the democratic systems from local to central levels of Iraq, to be increasingly participatory and responsive. Our research set out to test this theory and to use the results to inform democracy and governance programs and policies in Iraq and analogous contexts.

Research Question and Theories of Change

Understanding what factors contribute to good governance outcomes in Iraq is critical for identifying how programs like BPCS can help to strengthen the democratic systems. Though democracy and governance programs have burgeoned in many post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts, little is definitive about the mechanisms through which good governance can be achieved and sustained. What is known is that the process by which a country emerging from conflict goes about forging governance mechanisms matters. The roles of civil society in this process have been diverse across contexts and

merits robust research for effective models. To address this knowledge gap, the present study analyzed data from Mercy Corps' recent civic attitudes and behaviors survey in Iraq to investigate what influences attitudes related to three key governance outcomes: political efficacy, perceptions of government responsiveness and legitimacy.

- **Political Efficacy** – the degree to which citizens feel they have a voice and can influence government decisions and policies. This ability to influence political outcomes is considered essential for democratic governance to be meaningful for citizens.²
- **Government Responsiveness** – government's ability to address the primary concerns of citizens. Through participation in the democratic process, citizens seek to have their concerns heard and responded to by their government.
- **Government Legitimacy** – an indicator of a healthy and reciprocal relationship between government and citizens. If citizens do not believe that their government is legitimately working on their behalf, the very foundation of the democratic system is jeopardized and citizens may express their discontent either through political apathy, protest or violence.³

Our analysis tested three theories of change or hypotheses that link the strategies of the BPCS program to the above mentioned outcomes. (See ANNEX 2 for full regression outputs)

Theory 1: If Iraqi citizens and communities believe that CSOs are able to improve services and governance, then they will be more likely to believe that they can influence government decisions and policy

Theory 2: If Iraqi citizens and communities believe that CSOs are able to improve services and governance, then they will be more likely to think government is responsive to their concerns

Theory 3: If Iraqi citizens and communities believe that they can influence government decisions and policy, then they will be more likely to think government is legitimate.

Methodology

The nature of many governance programs limits how amenable they can be to rigorous evaluative research. Therefore, this study attempted to test critical assumptions underlying governance interventions using quantitative cross-sectional data. The primary data used is a nationally representative civic attitudes and behavior survey of 5,000 individuals in all 18 governorates of Iraq, which was conducted in April 2013 as part of the BPCS program.

Regression analysis was used to test the key relationships within the three theories of change. Several specifications were run on the three key outcomes to examine the robustness of our results. In addition, in all models we include a comprehensive set of control variables, including gender, age, education, poverty, employment status, urban vs. rural location, region, ethnicity and religion, to account for differences that may be due these factors.

A limitation of the survey tool is that it was unable to capture nuances in perceptions of government and civil society. For example, most queries about government did not make a distinction between local, provincial and federal government and questions regarding civil society in the survey did not differentiate between formal/registered CSOs and informal civil society groups.⁴

To complement the survey analysis, we conducted focus group discussions and key informant interviews with citizens and civil society actors in Iraq in March 2014. Feedback from key democracy and governance stakeholders in Iraq, including Mercy Corps BPCS staff and CSO leaders, was also solicited to help interpret the quantitative findings.

Key Findings

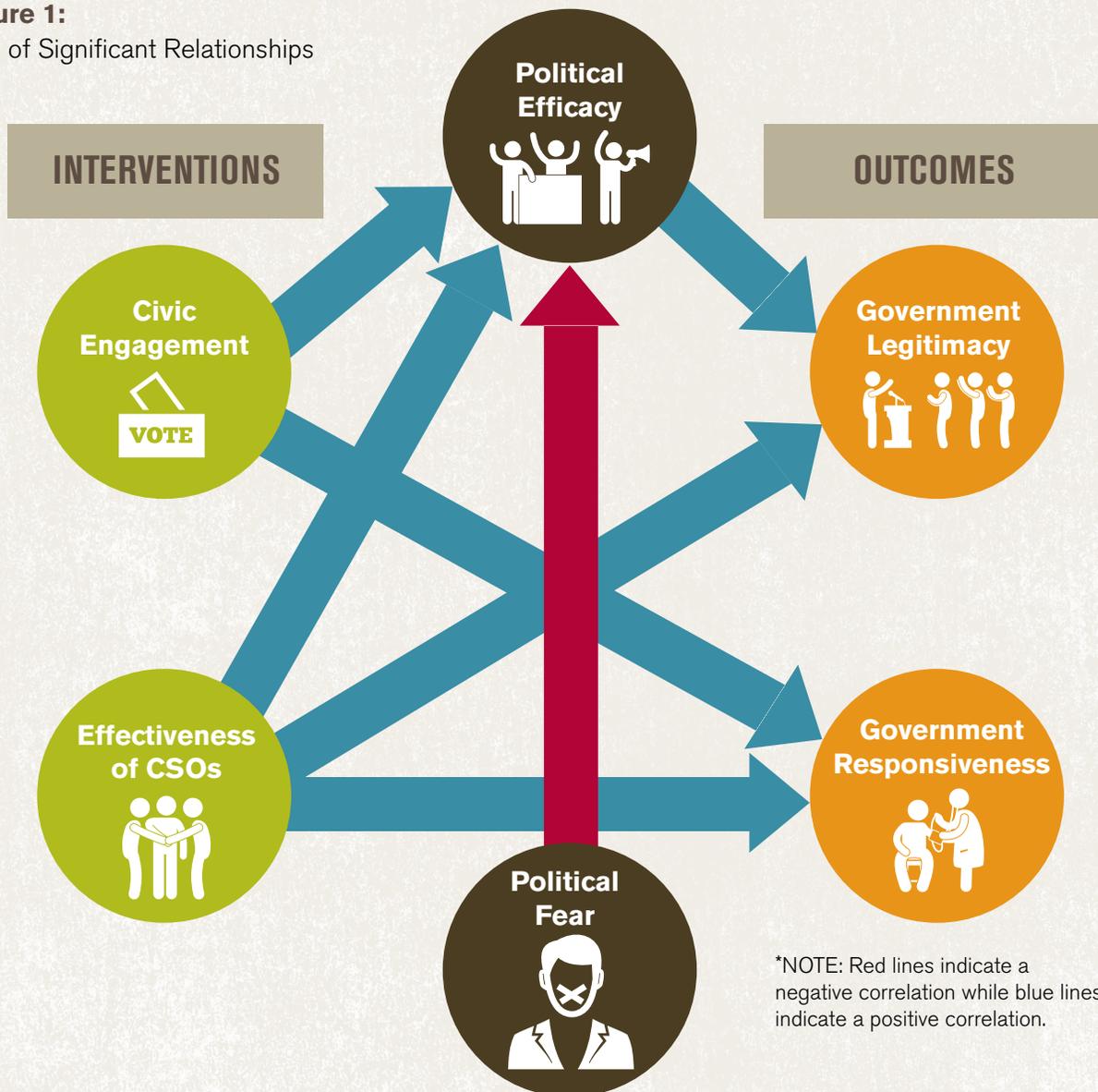
The figure below illustrates the significant relationships between civic attitudes and behaviors in Iraq. (See Table 1 in the ANNEX 2 for full regression outputs)

Political Efficacy

When it comes to understanding what influences citizens' perceptions of being able to affect government decisions, as predicted, perceptions of CSO effectiveness are positively correlated with political efficacy. In other words, individuals who view CSOs as capable of making improvements in areas spanning from services

delivery to rights promotion are more likely to believe that they themselves can have an effect on government policies. Ostensibly, the effectiveness of CSOs in improving conditions may set an example for citizens and transfer to them a sense of empowerment and personal or collective agency. This relationship is significant even after we control for different levels of civic engagement—measured by membership in a group, partaking in civic and volunteer activities and intending to vote. Unsurprisingly, political fear has a negative influence on political efficacy, such that individuals who have more fear are less likely to think that they can influence governance decisions.

Figure 1:
Map of Significant Relationships





Responsiveness of Government

To test the second theory of change, we examined whether the view that CSOs are able to improve conditions important to people's lives is related to perceptions of government responsiveness. The findings indicate that individuals who believe CSOs are effective are more likely to think that government is working to improve conditions in various areas, including service delivery, security and employment. For Iraqi citizens, there seems to be an implicit connection between CSOs' ability to improve key concerns in their communities and the willingness of the government to respond to those concerns, as the former very often relies on the latter. This relationship remains after we control for other factors that may be closely related to perceptions of government responsiveness, such as government legitimacy and levels of civic engagement. Moreover, though political efficacy is linked to the view that CSOs are capable of improving conditions (theory 1), we found no significant relationship between higher levels of political efficacy and higher ratings of government responsiveness, indicating that the relationship between political efficacy and government responsiveness may not be direct, but rather, contingent on perceptions of CSOs' effectiveness.

Government Legitimacy

Finally, we surmised that higher levels of political efficacy would be associated with higher assessments of government legitimacy. The regression analysis confirmed this hypothesis and revealed a robust relation-

ship between the two variables even when controlling for other factors thought to be linked to legitimacy, such as political fear and perceived responsiveness of government. In effect, people who believe they can influence government decisions are more likely to view the government in a positive light, conceivably because they believe that their participation and voice is valued. Surprisingly, the analysis also found that perceived effectiveness of CSOs is positively related with government legitimacy, and remains significant in several different model specifications. Although we did not anticipate this relationship, we interpret the result to mean that perceptions of civil society effectively addressing citizens' concerns reflects positively on government because the effectiveness of CSOs, in part, depends on the willingness of government to engage with civil society and respond to citizens' concerns. This explanation is bolstered by the positive relationship found between perceived effectiveness of CSOs and responsiveness of government (theory 2).



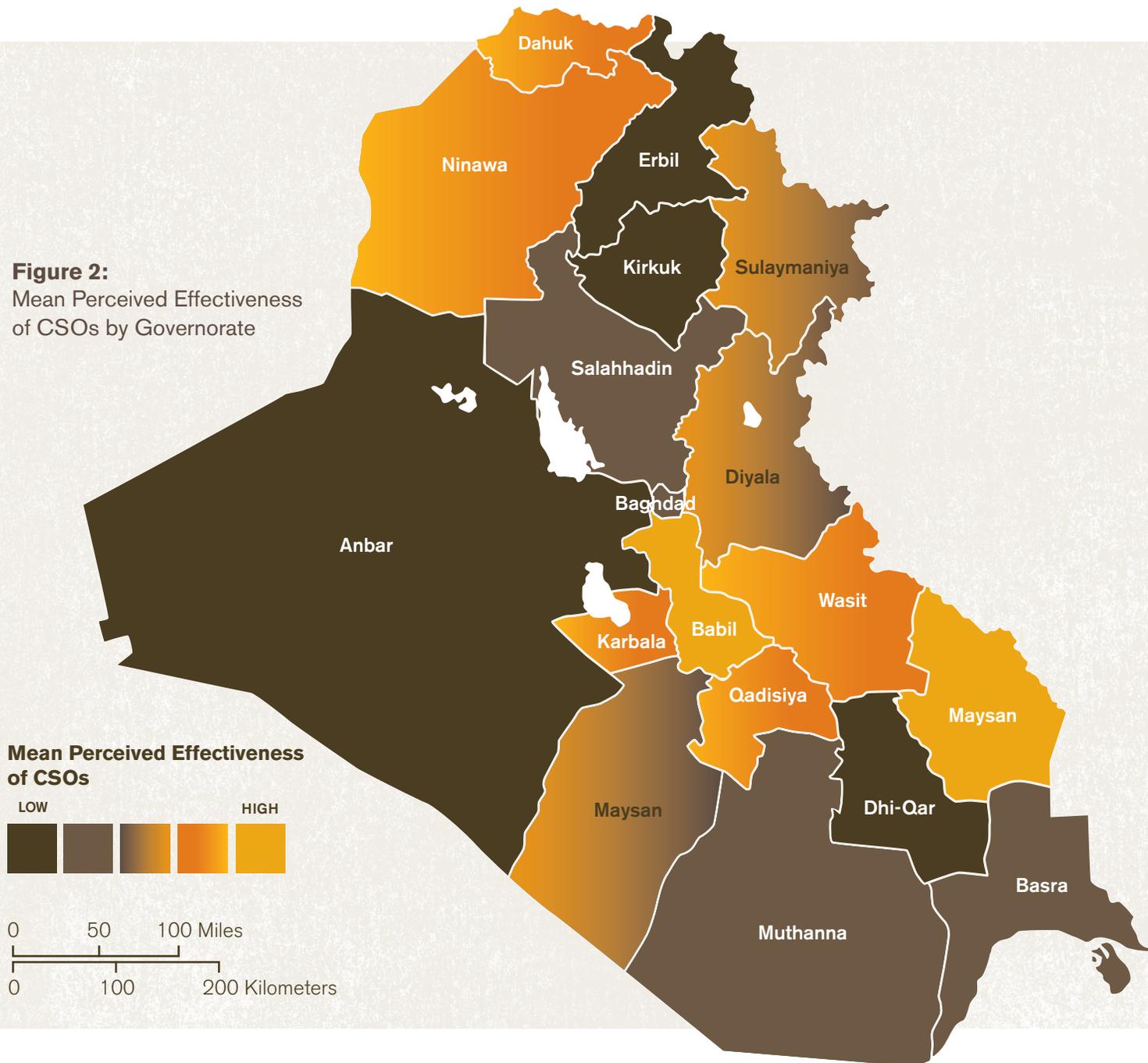
Additional Findings

Further analysis showed that perceptions of civil society in Iraq vary by socio-demographic group and location. These differences are statistically significant, for example, when it comes to education, religion, ethnicity and province, but not significant for gender and age. For ethnicity and religion, we found that non-Arab and non-Shia individuals tend to view CSOs as being less effective. Perceptions of CSOs being effective were highest amongst university and high school graduates as well as individuals with no schooling, while those with middling levels of education had lower ratings of CSO effectiveness.

Figure 2 below illustrates how perceptions vary by province, in which brighter areas indicate places where perceptions of CSOs being effective are relatively higher. Iraqis in Western and Northern Provinces, such as Anbar, Baghdad, Salahaddin, Kirkuk and Erbil, generally view CSOs as relatively less effective.⁵ In an attempt to better understand what drives perceptions of CSOs effectiveness, our analysis found that higher assessments of effectiveness is correlated with greater awareness of and trust in civil society—which may be entirely separate from CSOs actual capacity.

Discussions with civil society leaders representing 11 provinces in Iraq helped shed light on the challenges facing civil society that can hinder them from being seen as effective. Though the civic attitudes and behaviors survey revealed that insecurity and government corruption are ranked as the biggest problems in Iraq (29.3% and 22.9% of respondents, respectively), the majority of civil society actors who were interviewed expressed that there is little which they are or can be doing to help improve security and reduce corruption. The hurdle for civil society in Iraq is moving beyond rais-

Figure 2:
Mean Perceived Effectiveness
of CSOs by Governorate



ing awareness within government to finding meaningful strategies to address these cross-cutting issues. For example, one activist remarked that “some CSOs are trying to raise awareness about insecurity in their areas, but it is not making much difference. The government knows about the security problems; they don’t need someone to tell them.”⁶

Furthermore, many CSO representatives explained that they often face barriers when attempting to work with government. These challenges stem from the bureaucratic nature of government institutions that make it cumbersome and difficult to achieve results, in addition to the lack of cooperation by government officials when civil society organizations try to tackle sensitive issues such as corruption and human rights abuse. Importantly, the presence and backing of international NGOs and donors in Iraq can give civil society greater confidence in challenging the government on such issues. “We need support from INGOs in order to be a strong advocate in front of government,” one participant expressed.⁷ Moreover, in recent years, a number of youth-based groups seeking to achieve change through nonviolent movements have begun to mobilize young people, using social media platforms. Though some of these groups remain informal, through programs like BPCS, they are receiving guidance and support to organize more effectively and advocate for policy changes peacefully.

Implications

The take-away conclusion of this analysis is that efforts to strengthen the capacity and legitimacy of civil society organizations can help improve important governance outcomes such as political efficacy, government responsiveness and legitimacy. Because civil society plays a crucial role in mediating the relationship between citizens and their government, citizens’ view of government and their ability to influence government decisions largely depends on what they perceive civil society is able to do. This finding provides new insight into the likely effects of civil society strengthening programs, which have, for the most part, worked on the assumption that civil society is primarily a check on government. Though civil society and government are often seen as being inimical and rarely thought to have

mutual interests, the BPCS program is based on this concept and this research exposes the interdependence between the two in achieving their objectives: for civil society, to be seen as effective and impactful, and for government, to be seen favorably and gain trust and support from citizens. This interdependence can be used as a platform to incentivize closer engagement between government and civil society groups, and to exemplify that the partnership between government and civil society is positive, necessary and effective.

In practical terms, the study indicates that programs like BPCS, which support civil society groups, can potentially have additional benefits on governance in Iraq, beyond increasing civic participation and political efficacy. If these programs can help CSOs have a greater impact in various realms of policy and development, then our findings imply that the results of such initiatives will be seen not only in the immediate changes brought about by CSOs but also in gradually helping to improve the relationship between citizens and their government. In Iraq, where the bond between citizens and government is tenuous given the nascent stage of democracy and ongoing security challenges, supporting civil society’s engagement in governance can be essential for long-term stability.

While our findings point towards a likely positive influence of CSOs on governance outcomes, a cautionary note is warranted so that these results are not taken to imply a causal relationship. The techniques used in this study are able to detect relationships between different civic views and behaviors, but they are not able to specify the direction of the relationships. As such, though theory and experience may help to explain the notion that perceptions of CSOs’ effectiveness influences citizens’ views of government, the relationship may be in the opposite direction or mediated through other factors not captured in our study.

Similarly, though we adopt the view that improving citizens’ perceptions of government are positive means for enhancing stability in Iraq, an alternative interpretation may view this outcome more critically. This may be the case, for instance, if increased perceptions of CSOs’ effectiveness help to dampen criticism of government not necessarily because government actually becomes more responsive but rather because CSOs are delivering services that the

government should be providing. In other words, because government can claim credit for the work being done by CSOs and International NGOs, increasing perceptions of legitimacy in a regime that remains inherently unresponsive, corrupt or closed, may be thought to work counter to the objective of strengthening good governance.

Further research, including subsequent perception surveys that measure exposure to civil society programs and qualitative case studies of CSOs' actions

leading to positive actions taken by government, is needed to better understand the mechanisms through which increased perceptions of CSOs effectiveness may influence citizens' views of government and the incentives for government to act according to civil society advocated approaches. Through additional survey analysis of an upcoming civic attitudes and behaviors survey and more in-depth qualitative research, we plan to address some of these questions raised through our initial research findings.

Recommendations

Supporting an open, legitimate, participatory and equitable system of governance in Iraq is vital to preventing the country from reigniting wide-spread violence and further instability. Donors, the Iraqi government and civil society stakeholders should continue to work towards this goal, applying insights from existing programs engaging civil society and government structures and governance-related research.

For Donors

- Maintain strengthening governance as a long-term goal for engagement in Iraq.
- Continue supporting long-term civil society strengthening programs, both in areas where organizations are seen as ineffective or unresponsive (such as policy advocacy and playing a watchdog role) and areas where institutions are nascent but effective or responsive, so that civil society can be supported to succeed and provide models for others.
- Engage with the Government of Iraq (GOI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to strengthen the enabling environment for Iraqi civil society.

For the Iraqi Government

- The GOI and KRG plan to sign compacts for coordination with Iraqi CSOs/NGOs. To actualize these agreements, government should increase

collaboration with civil society organizations to identify and address key citizen concerns, facilitate opportunities that develop the country and establish modalities for sustained civic engagement.

- Work with media to publicize joint civil society/government initiatives that are improving service delivery, promoting rights, responding to citizen concerns or demonstrating good governance.
- Support an enabling environment for civil society. Specifically, reduce bureaucratic hurdles (including the processing time for civil society groups to register) protect freedom of expression of activists, and provide financial incentives to sustain civil society (such as public grants, tax exemptions or public benefit status for non-profit groups and tax incentives for donations to CSOs/NGOs).

For Iraqi Civil Society Organizations

- Increase collaboration with government at all levels and expand role as a bridge connecting citizens with government.
- Invest in strengthening policy analysis and policy crafting competencies, including research and media relations
- Invest in robust and credible management systems to build credibility and trust with donors and the general public.
- Actively work to diversify sources of support – financial and non-financial – from the public and private sector, including the expansion of individual donors and members.

Annex 1: Definition of Key Variables

In order to operationalize the predictor (independent) and outcome (dependent) variables for the hypothesis testing, we used factor analysis where appropriate, or constructed scales through linear combinations of multiple questions related to the same underlying concept.

Political Efficacy—a four question composite scale constructed through linear combination that examines citizens' views of their ability to influence policies in local, provincial, regional and federal government entities. Higher values indicate more political efficacy

Government Responsiveness—a nine question composite scale constructed through linear combination that examines citizens' views that government will improve conditions in their province in relation to electricity, water, jobs, security, government corruption, women's rights, education, pollution and youth rights. Higher values indicate higher rating of responsiveness

Government Legitimacy—an eleven question composite scale constructed through factor analysis that examines citizens views about their government representatives in the following dimensions (1) fairness and honesty (2) availability (3) actively working to solve problems and meet community's needs (4) aware of citizens concerns (5) engagement with citizens (6) listening to citizens (7) not working for own self-interest (8) competence and professionalism (9) accountability (10) openness and honesty (9) transparency. Higher values indicate higher rating of trust.

Effectiveness of CSOs—a nine question composite scale constructed through linear combination that examines citizen's views that civil society organizations will improve conditions in their province in relation to electricity, water, jobs, security, government corruption, women's rights, education, pollution and youth rights. Higher values indicate higher rating of effectiveness.

Intent to Vote—a single question asking if citizens plan to vote in upcoming elections

Group Membership—a four question composite scale constructed through linear combination that examines if individuals are part of any of the following groups: religious-based group, syndicate or association, professional or business association, community development or self-help association/CSO.

Community Volunteering and Civic Action—an eight question composite scale constructed through factor analysis that examines engagement in the following activities: (1) contacting a government official for help solving a problem or sharing views (2) meeting a government official for help solving a problem or sharing views (3) participating with others to improve community or country (4) voluntary work in community (5) donating money to non-religious CSO (6) participated in advocacy campaign (7) participating in civil society organized activity (8) help others understand how to peacefully demonstrate to improve government services

Political Fear—an eight question composite scale constructed through factor analysis that examines individuals' fears to engage in the following activities: (1) meeting with community members to discuss collective concern (2) voting in national election (3) participating in a demonstration (4) running for public office (5) contacting government official about concerns or problems (6) telling others in the community which political party one supports (7) expressing oneself freely when discussing politics (8) signing a petition.

Regional Dummy Variables

Northern Region/Kurdistan—Dahuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniya
Northern Triangle—Anbar, Ninawa, Kirkuk, Salahhadin
Central Region—Babil, Diyala, Karbala, Najaf, Wasit, Baghdad
Southern Region—Basra, Maysan, Muthanna, Qadisiya, DhiQar

Annex 2: Summary of Regression Outputs

	Theory 1: Political Efficacy	Theory 2: Government Responsiveness	Theory 3: Government Legitimacy
Effectiveness of CSOs	0.320***	0.276***	0.155**
Political Efficacy		-0.007	0.073***
Intent to Vote	0.082	0.062***	-0.067*
Group Membership	0.373**	0.170***	0.798***
Community Volunteering and Civic Action	0.219	0.091**	-0.080
Government Legitimacy		0.079***	
Responsiveness of Government			0.402***
Political Fear	-0.204**	-0.028	0.025
Rural	0.345***	0.084***	-0.063
Self-Assessed Poverty	-0.007	-0.033*	-0.059
Unemployed	-0.266	-0.024	0.072
Minority Religious Group	-0.082	-0.157***	0.131
Minority Ethnic Group	0.173	0.006	-0.045
Pessimism about country's future	0.063	-0.195***	-0.189***
Youth (18-31yrs)	0.139	-0.027	-0.043
Education Level	-0.100*	-0.016	-0.066**
Male	-0.434***	-0.015	-0.036
Northern Triangle	0.588*	-0.299***	-0.313**
Central Region	0.353	-0.370***	-0.299*
Southern Region	0.466	-0.342***	-0.237
Constant	2.668***	2.423***	2.061***
Observations	1589	1473	1473
R-Squared	0.032	0.3058	0.1475

***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1

Endnotes

- 1 "Civilian Casualties", United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq UNAMI, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=comk2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=159&Itemid=633&lang=en>
- 2 Mill, John Stuart (1865). Considerations on Representative Government. London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green.
- 3 Sam Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).
- 4 Though the analysis and discussions in this brief aims to make some generalizations about civil society in Iraq, we fully acknowledge that civil society is neither static nor homogenous. In addition to differences between formal and informal civil society groups, civil society groups in Iraq range in terms of their affiliation with political parties, credibility, capacity and causes. We explored these issues qualitatively, though a comprehensive analysis of civil society in Iraq is beyond the scope of this research brief.
- 5 Although this trend may partly be due to the limited opportunities for CSOs to work in areas such as Anbar, Kirkuk, Baghdad and Salahaddin where insecurity poses a significant challenge, the low assessment of CSOs in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Province of Erbil, where arguably groups have more capacity and can operate more freely, may seem surprising. This may be the case, however, because expectations of civil society are higher in the KRG, where CSOs that have been more actively engaging with citizens for a longer time.
- 6 Focus Group Discussion, Erbil Civil Society Leaders, Erbil Iraq, March 4, 2014.
- 7 Focus Group Discussion Kirkuk Civil Society Leaders, Kirkuk Iraq, March 5, 2014.
- 8 For regional dummy variables, Northern Region (Kurdistan) is left out as the reference group. Beta coefficients can be interpreted as such: a one standard deviation increase in (perceived) CSO effectiveness leads to a 0.320 standard deviation increase in political efficacy.



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