

ICSP COMPONENT

STRENGTHENING INDEPENDENT MEDIA



ADF's **Iraq Civil Society and Independent Media Program (ICSP)** strengthens Iraq's emerging commercial and public service media, emphasizing professional news and public affairs reporting to better inform and engage the Iraqi public in the democratic process. The ICSP program provides varied and ongoing support for media outlets developing at both the national and local levels. With ICSP assistance, Iraqi journalists have the chance to build journalism skills, learn media management techniques, and advocate for a legal and regulatory system conducive to free speech and independent, responsible media.

The National Iraqi News Agency (NINA)

ICSP helped a group of Iraqi journalists to establish the *National Iraqi News Agency (NINA)*, **the first independent and professional news agency in the Arab world**. Within five months this agency has developed into the sole non-partisan, independent media outlet of national significance. NINA has just started generating revenue, demonstrating remarkable potential to be commercially viable and therefore sustainable over the long term.

- **Coverage of key events:** NINA set new ethical standards with its coverage of the constitutional referendum in October and the December parliamentary elections, the Saddam Hussein trial and other key issues. Almost all serious newspapers, radio and TV stations are using NINA material, improving the quality of their own reporting.
- **Growing reputation in Iraq:** The NINA website (www.ninanews.com) registers over **110,000 visitors** per month, generating in excess of **80,000 page images on a single day**. NINA received 1500 credits in March 2006 in 40 leading newspapers and key broadcast media.
- **A showcase for unity in diversity and a new Iraq:** NINA is chaired by a Christian, edited by a Sunni and managed by a Shia. Personnel include Kurds and other ethnic/religious groups. These journalists have braved two attacks on their agency, one when a triple bombing hit the neighboring Palestine Hotel days after the NINA office opened, and another when an armed gang forced them to abandon their initial head office.

Valued by other stakeholders: The *Federation of Arab News Agencies (FANA)*, whose leadership has assisted the process, is hoping that NINA will become a model in building independent, commercial news agencies in the region. Within Iraq, NINA can be relied on for wide dissemination of credible, balanced reporting on key developments.

Developing an Independent Public Broadcasting System

The Iraqi Media Network has suffered credibility problems from its start. It first was regarded by many Iraqis as a mouthpiece for coalition forces and then as a tool of the Iraqi government. Neither media professionals nor the public believed that IMN could be independent since the regime of Saddam Hussein had used the state broadcaster as the government's propaganda tool for so long. However, the ICSP has assisted IMN in creating legitimate public service programming, developed a public watchdog to lobby for the independence of IMN, and helped build a coalition that has drafted legislation to create a true independent public service broadcaster from the framework of IMN.

- **Programming to Advance Democracy:** The 32-episode "*Our Constitution*" talk show on al-Iraqiya TV – sponsored by ICSP – proved to be a public broadcasting milestone, galvanizing nation-building in Iraq and bringing unfettered constitutional debate to most every Iraqi

household. *Our Constitution* was singled out by the United Nations as a key contribution to the culture of dialogue. Building on this success, the subsequent “*Elect for Iraq*” program offered 90-minute episodes of often dramatic exchanges between office seekers and voter representatives from across the political spectrum selected out of the electorate by civil society groups. These programs were developed through detailed training and consultation provided from ICSP’s network of US and European experts experienced in top-flight media such as CNN and Reuters. This successful effort now is to be extended to other news programming in the Al-Iraqiya schedule, including programs linking the regions of Iraq, in order to help IMN continue to build its credibility among Iraqis.

- ***Developing a Media Watchdog Group:*** ICSP supports the *Iraqis for Public Broadcasting* watchdog group formed by a dozen eminent media and civil society personalities to monitor IMN programming, advocate for public broadcasting reform, and raise national awareness of public broadcasting principles. This watchdog group successfully advocated for a reorganization of IMN programming according to professional journalism standards. Resulting improvements include more news items broadcast based on merit and less of the government propaganda that undercuts IMN’s reputation. In addition, opposition figures, including prominent Sunni personalities, have started to be given a voice.
- ***Reform of Broadcast Legislation:*** ICSP is supporting a coalition of media organizations in their advocacy for a draft public broadcasting law that seeks to eliminate the government's role in nominating IMN board members. Once parliamentary committees are formed, this coalition will lobby parliamentarians to sponsor the draft law. The organization *Iraqis for Public Broadcasting* is the driving force behind the coalition’s ongoing work, along with the *National Association of Journalists* and other media organizations.

Stronger and More Independent Local Media

The ICSP media component works extensively outside Baghdad through its offices in Erbil, Basrah and Hilla to develop the capacity of local media. These outlets often represent the concerns of minority groups, including Sunni and Kurdish communities. Most journalists have no experience in providing independent, credible coverage and the training they receive is their start toward professionalism.

- ***Improved News Reporting throughout Iraq:*** ICSP has trained journalists countrywide on covering topics of critical public interest such as corruption, the political process, and women's rights. This *training has reached one out of 10 media professionals in Iraq, including 1,037 journalists, nine Journalists Unions, and 20 media managers.* Local media outlets throughout the country have demonstrated improved coverage, providing vital information to their audiences as a result of ICSP training and technical assistance.
- ***Training of Media in the Constitutional Process:*** To enable quality coverage by Iraqi media of the constitutional process in Iraq, ICSP regional media support staff launched a massive training drive to educate journalists across the country. The sessions took place from Kurdistan to the Shat-al-Arab and gave media professionals the journalistic tools to report on constitutional issues for the first time with balance, accuracy and impartiality. *More than 100 media workers participated in these workshops.*
- ***Encouraging Monitoring of the Media:*** ICSP supported the *Ayinda Media Monitoring project* to observe and assess the quality of coverage during the election. The unit provided an informed, objective analysis of media coverage of crucial events such as procedural and other, more egregious, violations of the election process.