

The Rwanga Awards: Promoting Private Enterprise in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Societal transformation in Iraq requires motivated, capable young people who can redefine the status quo in their country.

Iraq has lacked political and economic stability since the founding of the state. And though many Iraqis believed that the political and economic conditions in the country would get better after April 2003, what people did not realize was that the Baath Party had, over the years of its rule, shaped the culture into one where efforts towards economic successes face significant barriers. The issues that plagued Iraq were not exclusively the results of a system of government whose demise would transform Iraq into a paradise. The creation of democracy does not rain down solutions on its own; it is the people's promotion of values, practices, and institutions that make a society capable of finding real solutions for large-scale problems.

The [Rwanga Foundation \(https://www.rwanga.org/about\)](https://www.rwanga.org/about) was founded as an effort to encourage this kind of productive creation in Iraqi society. Rwanga (meaning "vision" in Kurdish) centers itself in the idea that societies are built on three pillars: the public sector, the private sector, and the civil sector. Every reawakening or transformation that takes place in a modern country requires cooperation and coordination between these bases in its planning and implementation. In addition, transformations require home-grown initiatives that stir up a static populace and promote a constructive democratic culture that creates responsible people who care about the affairs of their local communities.

In pursuing this vision of societal transformation, the Rwanga Foundation has undertaken various initiatives, most of which seek to prepare a proactive, positive and modern generation of confident young Iraqis who actively participate in building a better society. As such, the Foundation emphasizes education as a gateway to improvement, empowering Iraqi youth as leaders for the future. By focusing on young people and innovation, Rwanga honors Albert Einstein's view that people cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them, an inspirational idea in the creation of the foundation.

Among Rwanga's most important initiatives are the [Rwanga Awards \(https://www.rwanga.org/awards\)](https://www.rwanga.org/awards), a yearly

process that honors the innovative work of young people in ten different fields, spanning from entrepreneurship and technology to visual arts and literature. Each year, participants have the opportunity to present their own projects and innovations to specialized committees in their field. After a process of scrutiny and examination, the best three projects are chosen according to criteria set by specialist judges. After nominees are selected, winners receive their awards at the annual award ceremony, an event that brings together the finalists, families, friends, enthusiasts, specialists, and notable guests.

The awards seek to provide participants with a platform to discover themselves and showcase their work while also opening opportunities for employment and further work on their areas of interest. The awards therefore serve as a platform to present the youth and their projects, as well as an opportunity for finalists to build confidence and acquaint themselves with broader society. The awards can also strengthen cooperation and coordination between young Iraqis at a time when their generation is coming into its own.

Many award-winners and finalists have gone on to achieve great things. One example is Salar Faiq, a young man from Shikhan who took second place in the entrepreneurship category in 2017. By 2020, Faiq was the owner of his own public relations company with six employees. When asked, "How have you benefited from our initiative?" he said, "I got to know the first-place winner, and after the ceremony was over we went out for dinner together. We thought over how we could work together, and actually opened a restaurant in Erbil. He runs the restaurant and I work on marketing. We continued for a while, then I kept going with my ideas. Now, I am working on multiple projects and dealing with multiple parties."

Another finalist, Zrebar Hawrami, founded her own sewing company in 2014. Hawrami, a young woman from Sulaymaniyah, participated in the 2016 Rwanda Awards and **won first place in entrepreneurship** (<https://twitter.com/zrebarhawrami/status/808356107236343808?lang=en>). She says winning the prize was a big boost of moral support—it motivated her and gave her self-confidence. She continued working on her passion after winning the award, and she currently has one factory in Sulaymaniyah and another in Erbil along with three clothing showrooms in the two cities. She also has work contracts with schools, companies, restaurants, and military bodies to sew their uniforms.

In a similar vein, Lana Barham (26), another young woman from Sulaymaniyah, began her work in 2016 by making handbags and clothing in a style that combined heritage and modern fashions. Barham used her designs to start a company, which she named Khattan21, but struggled due to a lack of funding, challenges with registering the company, and the difficulties of balancing work and study. When Barham heard about the Rwanda Awards, she participated and **won the entrepreneurship category** (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/081220181>) in 2018. Barham speaks highly of the awards, noting that Rwanda helped finance her work through a financial reward, assisted her in registering her company, and introduced her to other young people in her field. In 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic stagnation across Iraq, she participated in Milan Fashion Week as the event's first-ever Iraqi participant.

Another example is Ayman Sabri (22) a young man from Zakho who comes from a family of eight brothers and two sisters. A fourth-year student at the College of Administration and Economics at Zakho University, Sabri is a self-made young man who loves computers. After experiencing doubt from his peers and mentors, Sabri said that winning the Rwanda Awards in 2020 while he was still in university gave him, his family, and his peers much of the hope and confidence necessary for him to carry on with his dream. After winning the award, Sabri received eight job offers in his field, **including an offer** (<https://twitter.com/HiwaAfandi/status/1355988506338848771>) from the Director-General of the Kurdistan Regional Government's Department of Information Technology.

Finally, there's Mohammad Azad, who participated four times in the practical inventions category with four innovative projects, starting in 2014. Each time, Azad fell short of first place, until he finally won the scientific

innovation category in 2017 with an idea for a waiter robot. Mohammad currently studies computer engineering at Tishk University in Erbil and says, “the experience taught me that the path to success demands perseverance and patience. Along the way, we learn a lot and become more aware of ourselves and of life.”

Despite their successes, these young creators face a harsh environment. Iraq is a rentier state, relying on oil for **95 percent of all state revenues** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iran-sanctions-iraq-exclusive/exclusive-iraq-to-increase-oil-output-and-exports-waits-on-iran-sanctions-minister-idUSKCN1NB1Q0>). Iraq is the **sixth largest oil producer** (<https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6>) in the world with the **fifth largest oil reserves** (<https://www.worldometers.info/oil/oil-reserves-by-country/>) and **twelfth largest gas reserves** (<https://www.worldometers.info/gas/>) of any country. Despite this mineral wealth, the Iraqi Ministry of Planning reports that in 2020, the proportion of Iraqi citizens below the poverty line was **32 percent** (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/one-third-of-iraqis-expected-to-be-living-in-poverty-by-year-s-end-1.1050231>). Iraq’s corruption **ranks 160 out of 180 countries** (<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/nzl>) and Iraq ranks **176 out of 188 states** (https://reliab.org/uploads/files/ICI_INGLES_2020_36pags2.pdf) in the quality of its institutions. Iraq also ranks **172 out of 190 countries** (<https://tradingeconomics.com/iraq/ease-of-doing-business>) in the ease of doing business. Even from this short review, the outlook for Iraq seems bleak.

Nonetheless, neither pessimism, nor seeking to escape these problems without fixing them, nor migrating to Europe and the United States is a solution to the country’s problems. To that point, the Rwanda Awards promote the idea that optimists will make history. Many young people have been through the trials of modern Iraqi life, but they still managed to create better situations for themselves and for the coming generations with willpower and diligent management. Development is a continuous process without end, characterized by debate and difficulty, and it is a mistake to tie its success to the false differentiation of intelligent peoples and backwards peoples. Rather, the Rwanda Foundation believes in the possibility for any people to change their reality by pursuing development, learning from their mistakes and the mistakes of others while realistically estimating the limitations and requirements of their situation. By recognizing young Iraqis who reflect these values, the foundation hopes to empower those who lead Iraqi society towards a better future. ❖

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