



ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

Iraq Leadership Fellows

IRIS | American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
Institute of Regional &
International Studies

 **DT Institute**

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Shaping the next generation of politically and socially engaged Iraqis committed to their country — from Basra to Duhok.

Young Iraqis, from communities in Basra to Duhok, face challenges that are all too real

Young Iraqis, from Basra in the south to Duhok in the north, are working in contexts shaped by real social, political and environmental strain. Leadership here is carried out under pressure, often with limited support. Now in its seventh year, the ILF program is designed with that reality in mind.

In 2025, fellows from 12 governorates joined the ILF program. They brought a wide range of experiences, alongside a seriousness and level of engagement that was evident throughout. This newsletter reflects their time together. It captures the conversations that mattered, the challenges they navigated, and the work they are beginning to take forward. It offers a sense of a network that is forming, and the kinds of leadership it is starting to sustain.

— THE ILF TEAM



About the Iraq Leadership Fellows (ILF)

Through a partnership between **DT Institute** and **the Institute of Regional & International Studies (IRIS)** at the American University of Iraq–Sulaimani, the ILF program was founded in 2017 to train the next generation of politically and socially engaged young Iraqis committed to shaping the future of their country. The ILF program equips Iraqis aged 25–35 with the skills, confidence, and networks needed to take on leadership roles across the country. Each year, between **30 and 50** fellows are divided into two groups to receive focused training through social and political classes delivered via in-person workshops.

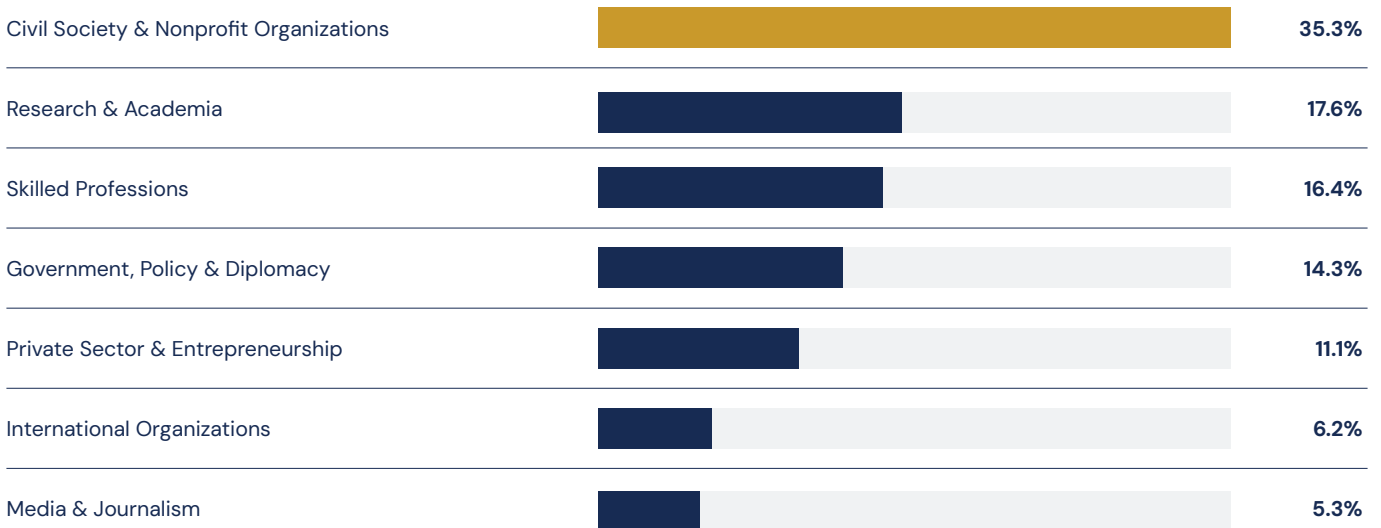
What truly distinguishes ILF is its lasting impact. With a growing network of **350+ alumni**, the program has built a vibrant community of changemakers who continue to collaborate, advocate, and contribute to Iraq's future long after the Fellowship has concluded. Both DT Institute and IRIS are working to ensure this alumni network continues engaging through a combination of online activities and in-person events, ensuring sustained connection, learning, and collective action.

■ 2025'S THEME & GOALS

The 2025 ILF cohort focused on practical and adaptive leadership in response to a set of overlapping pressures shaping Iraq today.

The 2025 ILF cohort focused on practical and adaptive leadership in response to a set of overlapping pressures shaping Iraq today. Fellows engaged with challenges such as weak public services, institutional fragmentation, political contestation, and the difficulty of exercising leadership in constrained environments, alongside emerging pressures like water scarcity and environmental stress. Reflecting IRIS and DT Institute's priorities, the program combined these themes with core leadership skills, including negotiation, conflict management, problem solving, and effective communication. Through workshops, simulations, and mentorship in adaptive leadership, participants worked through real scenarios, reflected on their own approaches, and collaborated across tracks. The aim was not only to strengthen individual leadership practice, but to help build a network better equipped to respond to the constraints and complexities that shape public life in Iraq.

Sector breakdown reflects professional data available for a sample of ILF alumni. Data collection is ongoing as the network of 350+ alumni continues to grow.



Gender participation:



Alumni by the numbers

350+

FELLOWS TRAINED SINCE 2017

30 – 50

SELECTED EACH YEAR

19

GOVERNORATES REPRESENTED

■ ALUMNI STORIES

Fellows Making a Difference Across Iraq

Four ILF alumni — spanning cohorts from 2019 to 2025 — reflect the breadth and depth of what the Fellows has built.



ERBIL · 2019

Hazhir Jaff

Political & Economic Analyst, Kurdistan Region Presidency

Hazhir Jaff is a Political and Economic Analyst at the Kurdistan Region Presidency. The ILF program helped him gain key skills that strengthened his ability to achieve his goals and overcome challenges. Passionate about leadership and public speaking, Hazhir engages in international forums and organizations to amplify the voices of Kurdish youth worldwide.



NAJAF · 2021

Layla Amer

Program Manager, Forsa Organization for Educational Development, Najaf

Layla Amer is a committed advocate for civic engagement and climate awareness in Najaf and an alumna of the 2021 ILF cohort. Holding a BA in law and driven to become an advanced researcher in politics—shaped by her belief that Iraq’s volatile context demands informed leaders—Layla serves as a Program Manager at the Forsa Organization for Educational Development, where she leads the Community Climate Connect (CCC) Program, a virtual exchange with TIEC in Texas that brings together university students from Iraq and the United States to discuss cross-cultural topics and climate-related challenges.



ANBAR · 2022

Saifaldeen Jabir

Senior Housing Programme Assistant, IOM Baghdad

Saifaldeen Jabir is a Senior Housing Program Assistant at the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Having experienced displacement with his family during his academic years, Saifaldeen was driven to support communities in rebuilding their homes and livelihoods.



BAGHDAD · 2024

Dhuha Mustafa

Women’s Advisory Council, NDI — Head of Finance Committee

Dhuha Mustafa is a committed advocate for women’s empowerment and inclusive governance in Baghdad. Through her role in the Women’s Advisory Council at NDI—where she serves as Head of the Finance Committee and a member of the Awareness and Training Committee—Dhuha supports local governments in addressing key social issues affecting women and the wider community. She has led initiatives engaging women, youth, and persons with disabilities. Today, she continues to champion meaningful civic engagement to strengthen women’s roles in public life.

KARBALA · 2025

Elaf Hussein

Assistant Lecturer, University of Karbala



01 Can you tell us a bit about yourself and what inspired you to apply to the ILF program?

I'm Elaf Ali Hussein, an assistant lecturer at the University of Karbala and a Youth Consultant with the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) on climate change initiatives. Having supported the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Environment Energy and Climate Change (EECC) pillar at the Climate Change Conference (COP28) and led climate resilience workshops for women's non-governmental organizations (NGO), I was encouraged by ILF alumni to join the policy track and civil society track to sharpen my policymaking skills and transition from advisor to decision-maker for Iraq's sustainable development.

02 What are the key issues or causes you're most passionate about in your community or line of work? How have these shaped your leadership path?

I'm deeply committed to building climate resilience and empowering youth to drive change. At UNAMI, I designed and facilitated climate adaptation workshops; at COP28, I authored sections of the EECC negotiations handbook; and in Erbil, I led a three-day workshop training 25 NGO leaders on advocacy strategies. These experiences reinforced my belief that sustainable impact comes from equipping communities with the tools and confidence to lead their own climate solutions.

03 How did ILF challenge or change the way you think about leadership or social impact? Were there moments where your assumptions were tested?

ILF fundamentally shifted my view of leadership through a hand-on exercise led by Mr. Hussam: in what felt like a standard negotiation drill, "hidden observers" were quietly evaluating our every decision. The scenario mirrored real Iraqi political dynamics so closely that it challenged my usual play-book approach. I was surprised to see how subtle changes in my tone, body language, or choice of alliances could tip the balance teaching me, as a leader, when to assert myself, when to listen, and how to pivot strategies on the fly. This experience revealed blind spots in my leadership style and underscored the need to remain adaptable and self-aware under pressure.

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■ IN THEIR OWN WORDS

04 Were there any specific skills or lessons from the program that you feel like you will use in your everyday life or work?

When the ILF trainer Mr. Mohammed introduced the “Story, Our Story, Story Now” framework, it transformed how I lead training and lectures: I now begin sessions with a personal anecdote, link it to the broader climate resilience challenge, and close with a clear call to action. This structured storytelling approach has become my go-to method—whether I’m guiding workshop participants or teaching my university students to make complex concepts resonate and inspire change

05 What was the most memorable part of your ILF journey—a moment, session, or experience that stayed with you?

The most memorable moment was the deep dive we did into misinformation vs. disinformation: the trainer showed us how a single unchecked fact can derail policy decisions, and underscored our responsibility as leaders to rigorously verify every piece of information before passing it on. That session has stayed with me. I now begin every lecture and training by modeling source-checking practices, ensuring my students and workshop participants learn to dig beneath the surface before taking action.

06 What part of your personal story do you now see as a leadership strength?

My dual roles lecturer and UN consultant have given me the ability to translate complex climate data into compelling narratives. Whether teaching as undergraduates or training others about the effect of the climate change on the next generation, I bridge the gap between analysis and action, building consensus across diverse groups.

07 How did the conversations on Climate Security and Water Politics connect with the realities in your own community?

In Karbala, fluctuating Euphrates levels and upstream dam operations shape local agriculture and drinking water access just as we examined in ILF’s Climate Security and Water Politics modules. I now integrate comparative case studies from those sessions into my lectures and community workshops, using them to advocate for more equitable water-sharing practices in our region.

08 Did the discussions on Environmental Accountability shift any of your previous views or priorities? If so, how?

Serving as a COP28 youth delegate alongside UNDP’s EECC pillar, I already valued rigorous data, but the ILF trainer Dr. Sameh’s deep dive showed me how our climate expertise itself is a form of soft power. He emphasized our duty, as emerging leaders, not only to gather and validate information but to turn it into action and to educate our communities. Now, in every resilience workshop I lead especially with women’s NGOs I build in community-led monitoring exercises, training participants to collect, verify, and report climate impacts. This approach ensures our advocacy rests on solid evidence and empowers those participants to become local guardians of accountability.

09 In one sentence, how would you describe your ILF experience so far?

ILF has been a catalyst, equipping me to drive climate-smart policy change.

DUHOK · 2025

Zeena Mizouri

Lawyer, Human Rights Activist



01 Can you tell us a bit about yourself and what inspired you to apply to the ILF program?

My name is Zina Mizouri, a lawyer from Duhok and a member of the General Assembly for Human Rights Defenders in Iraq. I'd heard so many great things about ILF from friends who had gone through the program — their stories really inspired me. I applied because I wanted to grow as a leader, connect with like-minded people, and find new ways to make a difference in my community.

02 What are the key issues or causes you're most passionate about in your community or line of work?

I'm really passionate about defending human rights and creating change in my community, especially around customs and traditions that sometimes hold us back—especially women. This passion has shaped my leadership by pushing me to speak up and support others, especially youth, because I truly believe that Iraq's future depends on the younger generation stepping up and leading the way.

03 How did ILF challenge or change the way you think about leadership or social impact?

Honestly, I'm still amazed at how the program really got inside my mind. The trainers reached parts of me I didn't expect. I always thought of myself as a leader, someone ready to run for parliament and boldly represent people. But through ILF, I discovered my weaknesses and learned how to improve them, helping me grow into the leader I always believed I could be.

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■ IN THEIR OWN WORDS

04 Were there any specific skills or lessons from the program that you feel like you will use in your everyday life or work?

Yes, I definitely learned a lot. One thing I started doing is writing down all my ideas and plans, especially about work. It helps me organize my thoughts, review them later, and figure out the best ways to tackle challenges and reach my goals. This habit has made a big difference in how I approach my daily tasks and long-term projects.

05 What part of your personal story do you now see as a leadership strength?

One part of my personal story that I now see as a leadership strength is my ability to overcome challenges on a personal, social, and even political level. These experiences have made me wiser, more thoughtful, and better at finding different solutions to problems. They've also helped me support and guide others—especially young people in my community. I believe this resilience and ability to lift others has shaped me into the kind of leader I am today.

06 How did the conversations on Climate Security and Water Politics connect with the realities in your own community?

The discussions were amazing and very meaningful for me. I learned a lot of new information, especially about water politics. I had never heard of such information before. I believe all the topics were closely connected to the realities in my community.

07 Did the discussions on Environmental Accountability shift any of your previous views or priorities? If so, how?

Definitely! For example, many of us had misconceptions about environmental issues. Most people believed that Iraq's pollution and desertification were mainly due to the lack of green spaces. But I learned that climate change is a natural process affecting all countries, and it's not just about planting trees. This shifted my perspective and helped me understand environmental accountability in a more accurate and global context.

08 In one sentence, how would you describe your ILF experience so far?

My ILF experience so far has been a deep and transformative journey that has reshaped how I see leadership and my role in creating change.



Two workshops **One mission**

In 2025, ILF held two intensive training workshops in Sulaymaniyah, bringing together 32 fellows from all 12 Iraqi governorates.

JUL
25 – 27 / 2025

WORKSHOP ONE — LEADERSHIP WITH PURPOSE
SULAYMANIYAH · IRIS AT AUIS · 32 FELLOWS · POLICY TRACK AND CIVIL SOCIETY TRACK

In 2025, ILF held two training workshops for 32 participants. On July 27–25, IRIS at AUIS launched the 2025 class of the Iraq Leadership Fellows by hosting the first training workshop of the year in Sulaymaniyah. The workshop, titled "**Leadership with Purpose**", brought together 32 fellows from across Iraq and the Kurdistan Region for an intensive leadership development experience. Participants were split into two specialized tracks: the policy track and civil society track. Over three immersive days, fellows in both tracks participated in hands-on training sessions led by the ILF capacity-building team. A major focus was on Adaptive Leadership—its frameworks and how they can be practically applied to confront Iraq's most critical issues. The ILF curriculum for 2025 integrated climate and environmental accountability themes as part of the sessions were focused on the urgent need for climate action, especially in the context of Iraq's growing crises around water scarcity and desertification.



HEAR FROM THE CAPACITY BUILDING TEAM

OCT
12 – 14 / 2025

WORKSHOP TWO — PRACTICE, REFLECTION & CERTIFICATION
SULAYMANIYAH · THREE DAYS OF ADVANCED LEADERSHIP MODULES & CERTIFICATION CEREMONY

The program had its second activity in 2025 on October 12 with a three-day intensive training workshop. The focus of the workshop was on the practical aspects of leadership, learn by doing and self-development. The sessions were conducted by Hussam Fakhoury, Zainab Qassim, and Mohammed Al-Moumin of the ILF Capacity Building Team, and IRIS Senior Fellow Dr. Sameh Al-Muqdadi. The sessions covered a range of important leadership skills. This included negotiation, conflict management, delegation, gaining trust, and communicating effectively. The advanced modules that participants explored included Problem Solving & Decision Making, Managing Polarity, Leading Tough Conversations, The Art of Listening, and System Thinking. Fellows reflected on their own leadership practices and collaborated across tracks to tackle complex social and political challenges in Iraq through interactive group exercises, simulations and joint sessions. The program ended with a **certification ceremony** for those who have undergone all aspects of the Fellows. In keeping with ILF’s mission, the workshop created a dynamic environment that is collaborative, **practice-oriented**, inclusive and develops renewing Iraqi leaders with the skills and networks to affect change in their communities. The ILF program in 2025 was made possible thanks to the continued support of DT Institute, a partner that has been with the initiative since its inception in 2017.

ALUMNI VOICES

ILF reshaped how I understand leadership—not as a stereotype, but as a set of skills I can apply daily and pass on to my team.

DALIA QAIS

Having participated in many local and international programs, I can confidently say that ILF stands out for its exceptional teaching materials and innovative learning approach.

HASANAIN FALAH:



■ HEAR FROM THE CAPACITY BUILDING TEAM

Leadership starts with personal development

Our 2025 trainers employed their extensive experience in leadership, team-building and capacity-building to bolster the self-awareness of the trainees and to effect a paradigm shift concerning leadership by instilling in them the idea that leadership starts with personal development.

Trainers: Hussam Fakhoury | Mohammed al-Moumin | Zainab Qassim | Sameh Al-Muqdad

Hussam Fakhoury, a 2025 ILF trainer, brought with him his experience in building team cohesion and individual resilience from his background as a basketball coach to the programme. "I was motivated by the chance to apply the principles of discipline and teamwork to a broader societal context to help young Iraqis navigate the complexities of civil and political leadership," said Fakhoury.

Mohammed al-Moumin, another of the 2025 ILF trainers, said he used his experience to help the ILF trainees find their strengths and develop their own brand of leadership. "My work as an ILF trainer has gone beyond capacity-building to becoming someone who assists fellows in starting a journey of self-discovering who they really are, their real values, strengths, and their own leadership philosophy," added al-Moumin.

CURRICULUM DESIGN

One way to make certain the program was relevant was to tailor the curriculum. Each of the trainers took inspiration from something to make their teaching material relevant. Zainab Qassim, ILF trainer, posited that her experience all over the country helped render her teaching material relatable for the trainees.

"My work across Iraq—from south to north—allowed me to speak honestly about complexity, pressure, failure, and resilience. Fellows recognized authenticity because the stories were real. These were not lectures, but human conversations rooted in respect for diversity and shared struggle," said Qassim.

Fakhoury used a listener-first approach, which helped him map out the socio-political challenges and opportunities the fellows face, to tailor his lectures, while al-Moumin drew inspiration from the many role models of leadership throughout Iraqi history along with crises and challenges that the country has fared through to contextualize his material.

CHALLENGES FACED

Nevertheless, the fellows had some challenges that needed to be tackled during the Fellows programme to ensure success. "Many fellows came with strong values and sharp minds, yet struggled with confidence, clarity, or trusting their own judgment," Qassim said. For Fakhoury, there is an obvious bottleneck. "In this cohort, the primary challenge—or 'bottleneck'—is the 'know-it-all' mindset, which often masks a fear of vulnerability," posited Fakhoury. For al-Moumin, the challenges that have arisen post-2019 for Iraqi youth needed to be tackled as well via "adaptive leadership" methods.

OUTCOMES

All four trainers, nevertheless, agreed that there was openness, intellectual curiosity, and commitment from the trainees. "I learned a lot from them. The 2025 cohort was special—they were a diverse, mature, and smart group. What they all shared was a high level of self-confidence, which was clear in their discussions, their articulation of values, and their leadership presence during simulations. At times, it felt like listening to real nation leaders in the region rather than young participants in a leadership course," said al-Moumin.

Qassim and Fakhoury agreed that this openness, willingness to make change was observable. However, the trainees should leverage the opportunity the ILF presents in network-building by remaining in touch and expanding this network. Sameh Al-Muqdad, an ILF trainer, agreed with this by saying, "Leadership is a lifelong journey rooted in leading by example. A leader's true impact is measured by how much they give back to their community."

The people behind the Fellows

In 2025, ILF held two intensive training workshops in Sulaymaniyah, bringing together 32 fellows from 12 Iraqi governorates.



Banu Omer

Working on the Iraq Leadership Fellows program over the past three years has been an incredibly transformative journey. Interacting with the fellows, listening to their stories, and exchanging ideas pushed me to reflect on my own values and assumptions. It has also been inspiring to see our fellows working in different places and making a positive difference in their communities. It's a powerful reminder of how much we can influence each other's paths and the communities around us.



Shvan Najm

Leading the Iraq Leadership Fellows program for the first time in my career has been an inspiring journey. Working with 32 exceptional young Iraqis, each driven by vision, resilience, and a deep commitment to our country, has renewed my own sense of hope. Their energy and ambition are a powerful reminder that Iraq's future is in capable and determined hands.

■ PARTNER CORNER



DT Institute

DT Institute is a US-based NGO dedicated to creating innovative pathways for open, informed, and peaceful societies. Working in high-conflict settings, we invest in grassroots leaders and movements often overlooked by traditional funding models. By providing the catalytic funding and strategic flexibility to partners such as the Iraq Leadership Fellows program, we are equipping a new generation of young Iraqi leaders from diverse backgrounds with advanced skills in leadership, communications, and policy analysis that will enable them to tackle the ever-evolving, complex social and environmental challenges. Our support is designed to bridge local expertise with international policymaking so together we can drive sustainable, meaningful change.

■ UPCOMING ACTIVITIES

The next chapter

Applications for the 2026 cohort open in June. Stay connected through IRIS social media and the AUIS website.

- JUN**
2026

LAUNCH OF ILF APPLICATIONS
Applications open to young Iraqis aged 25–35 from all 19 governorates across Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.
- JUL**
2026

ANNOUNCEMENT OF SELECTED FELLOWS
32 fellows selected for the 2026 cohort will be announced publicly.
- AUG**
2026

WORKSHOP I · SULAYMANIYAH
First intensive training workshop: Political and Social tracks candidates.
- OCT**
2026

WORKSHOP II · SULAYMANIYAH
Second workshop and certification ceremony for the 2026 fellows cohort.
- APR**
2027

ILF ALUMNI ROUNDTABLE AT THE SULAIMANI FORUM



Iraq Leadership Fellows

2025