

Helping to Empower the People

A German NGO is spreading the message for a better life in Iraq ■ By Caroline Fetscher

He is a realist, a pragmatist. He is a human rights activist, a profound believer in democracy. And above all, this 38-year-old German is a mover, a shaker, a doer. Tall, slim, fair-haired Thomas von der Osten-Sacken seems to be unable to rest.

We will always celebrate the day Baghdad fell and the day Saddam was captured,” said Thomas von der Osten-Sacken. While millions took to the street in spring 2003 to protest the upcoming invasion of Saddam’s torture-regime by U.S. troops, he and his co-campaigners of the Frankfurt-based nongovernmental organization WADI e.V. belonged to the three dozen demonstrators in favor of toppling this totalitarian system.

“I was a keynote speaker,” he remembers with a broad smile. “Later I was often congratulated on this by Iraqis, Kurdish and others, when they met me in the marketplace in Arbil or Suleymaniyah.” By the time these crucial days had arrived, the work of WADI’s activists for a better life in Iraqi Kurdistan had already been going on for over a decade.

“We came to the north after people in southern Iraq in 1991 told us to support the Kurds, since they managed to liberate them from the dictatorship of Saddam,” the campaigner said. “Ever since 2004, we have indeed almost been the last German NGO left in Iraq.” Three years ago, Berlin’s Foreign Ministry urged all registered charities to evacuate – yet

as WADI remains independent of German state funds, the group was able to keep following its own agenda – and stick around.

Enabling WADI’s work are mainly American institutions, foundations and donors. Major contributions to WADI projects were and are, for instance, made by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and various private funds from the U.S.

Once people on the ground are convinced of a project which WADI has drafted, “the crucial work is soon done by the people themselves,” said Thomas Uwer, another long term WADI campaigner. “Our job is to empower the people to find their own approach.”

Like their co-worker, Anne Mollenhauer, they are shuttling frequently between Germany and Iraq, mostly by flying from Germany to Turkey and then crossing the border by car into northern Iraq where they maintain offices in Suleymaniah and Arbil. “Of our 52 staff members, 37 are female,” Mollenhauer said pleased. “The oldest is 41. In societies where more than 50 percent are younger than 23, we try to give women and the young a chance.”

To assist Iraq’s women emerging from a position of lacking most rights to one of individual dignity is a crucial aim of WADI. These days, their crew is extremely happy over the success of a pilot project, an independent radio station run by young

men and women in the region of Shara Sur, Halabja and Hauraman. Initial funding was granted by USAID.

However, it is often difficult to find donors willing to cover running costs later. The team is lucky enough to have a private American foundation at its side generously filling in the financial gaps. Hence Radio Dange Nwe, Kurdish for “new voice,” can keep broadcasting as the first community radio ever in Iraqi Kurdistan.



A Kurdish woman crying in front of a mural at the commemoration for the victims of Halabja where the Saddam regime gassed thousands of people in 1988.

Young Galawesh once had to leave school as a result of religious pressure. Now she is producing background features and is thrilled by gaining legal rights. “I called my first feature, ‘Freedom begins in the head,’” recalled her colleague, Hero. “It was dedicated to those women who want to get rid of their chains in our society.”

Meanwhile Radio Dange Nwe has been broadcasting for two years. Costs are merely \$35,000 a year for license, equipment and wages to support a team

of 14 people who reach about 100,000 listeners in the region – a region where due to power shortages, television is still rare.

“Young people love the fact that the station is not owned nor controlled by any political party,” said Qeisar who works with the team. Local affairs, debates with officials over public spending and health care, popular and traditional music, daily call-in shows even about taboo issues such as sexuality are all part of the program.

violence against women. “The idea of a collective – family or clan – still dominates social life, not the concept of a responsible individual,” said Osten-Sacken sadly.

When in 2005 WADI dispatched field teams to engage in research about female genital mutilation (FGM), medical personnel and social workers were shocked at their findings. “Not even the World Health Organization had known how common FGM was,” said Osten-Sacken. Then, for the first time in centuries, women spoke up.

WADI commissioned filmmaker Nabaz Ahmed to produce a documentary which was shown in towns and villages. “Women were astonished to hear other women who had suffered incredible pain as well,” Mollenhauer tells her audiences in the West. Most women had thought they were the odd one out. With incredible relief, they saw an Islamic cleric openly condemning this tradition of mutilation on camera.

Soon local campaigners even took the issue to parliament. And Osten-Sacken whose favorite line is the question, “what went right?” stresses the point that “many men support this campaign too.” It is successes such as this one made possible by American funds that help these vigorous German activists continue their work in Iraq. A unique cooperation indeed which goes to show that another Iraq exists beyond the daily dose of bad news.

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