



Report on the Governorate Electoral Offices (GEOs) Liaison Officers Conference

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United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)

UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance



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SECTION 1:

Background

In the first quarter of 2021, OEA established regional offices in Erbil, Kirkuk, Mosul, and Basra, where Liaison Officers were recruited (GLOs) to facilitate regular relations with Governorate Election Offices (GEOs).

In line with UNAMI's expanded electoral assistance mandate in support of the 2021 Iraq Council of Representatives elections, the Office of Electoral Assistance (OEA) recruited and deployed national electoral officers who were deployed in each of the governorate offices of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). It was the first time that the UN electoral staff deployment to the governorate level to such an extent has occurred. In previous elections, most UN electoral advisers were primarily focused on providing advice and support to IHEC counterparts across the departments at the IHEC national office.

These OEA national electoral officers, or the so-called GEO Liaison Officers, became the focal point for interacting with the IHEC officials in the governorates. They helped to relay information and advice on ongoing electoral preparations while also serving as the eyes and ears of OEA on the status of readiness of each of the IHEC field offices. These GEO Liaison Officers reported to OEA regional electoral advisers based in the regional hubs in Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Ninewa. It thus comes as no surprise that these liaison officers do possess a wealth of information and experience in field operational preparations during the elections.

From 16-17 October, 20 GEO Liaison Officers, 11 staff members of the Baghdad UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance, and 10 UNV Regional Election Specialists attended the conference and discussed all the aspects of the GLOs' role in the field.

The main goal of the conference was to enable GEO Liaison Officers to share their experiences and knowledge and to reflect on how to improve their role and their performance as stakeholders in providing support to the electoral process in Iraq.

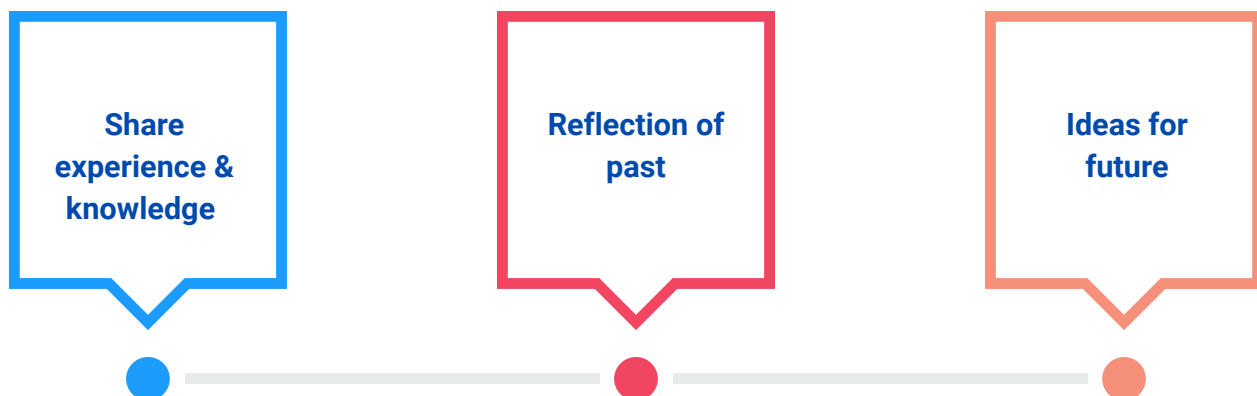


Figure 1: Goal of the conference

SECTION 2:

UNAMI Electoral Assistance to the 2021 CoR Elections.

Conference opened with a welcoming speech and elaborations from the Director of the Office for Electoral Assistance, Dr. Aamir Arain. He highlighted four major areas from the OEA mandate, the challenges facing the implementation, the achievement, and the significance of the conference.


In the past, the engagement and work of the United Nations in Iraqi previous elections was carried out by a small team based at the IHEC Headquarters. Its role and capacity were limited. After the changes in 2019 and 2020 that led to the establishment of a new Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and a new election law, the call for UN involvement in the electoral process in Iraq had increased. Iraq requested a more substantive support structure, both at national and regional levels, that would allow UNAMI to provide technical assistance, advice, and guidance to the Government of Iraq, the IHEC, and its Governorate Electoral Offices (GEOs). Iraq's request was considered by the UN headquarters in New York and, on May 27, 2021, five months before the 2021 Iraq Council of Representatives elections, the UNAMI electoral mandate was extended. Indeed, the new mandate included electoral assistance to IHEC across the country, election observation, public outreach activities, and support for international observation missions.



Figure 2: Dr. Aamir Arain, OEA director speaking at the opening session


The implementation of the project faced several challenges. First, the political and security environment in the country was very complex and unpredictable. Second, it was at the height of the pandemic crisis of Covid 19. Third, there was no allocated funding for the realization of the mandate. The Deputy SRSR for Political Affairs and Electoral Assistance and the Director of the Office of Electoral Assistance took the lead in the immediate fundraising that brought several donors on board. Within two months, a significant amount of funding was collected to start the project.

All the planned activities to support the CoR 2021 elections were implemented within 2021. For Iraq, it meant witnessing a historic moment, and the OEA team has the right to be proud of what Iraq has achieved in the 2021 elections.



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For Iraq, it meant witnessing a historic moment, and the OEA team has the right to be proud of what Iraq has achieved in the 2021 elections. This success was made possible thanks to the hard work of the 256-person strong OEA team. The GEO Liaison Officers and the UNV Regional Election Specialists have played a crucial role.



OEA has contributed to the organization of elections recognized by the international community and IHEC as the best in the history of Iraq. As a result of the full involvement of OEA and its constructive collaboration with IHEC, IHEC improved in terms of delivery, gained some credibility, and became a trusted institution more than ever. In the context of widespread disappointment, loss of trust in the governmental and political institutions, and the lack of interest in elections in the country since 2005, the recognition of the credibility of IHEC is a big victory.

This success was made possible thanks to the hard work of the 256-person strong OEA team. The GEO Liaison Officers and the UNV Regional Election Specialists have played a crucial role. Specifically, GEO Liaison Officers became the eyes and ears of OEA in the governorates around the country, and thanks to their work, OEA was in a better position to coordinate those crucial operational activities. In this regard, Dr. Aamir Arain expressed his sincere gratitude to all the participants for being part of the machine that made the UN and the international community proud of its involvement.

The two-day conference should be viewed as a lesson-learning workshop gathering the UNV and the GEO Liaison Officers to hear and learn from them through their experiences on the ground. It was necessary to generate feedback from GEO Liaison Officers on the challenges, difficulties as well as good practices in field operational preparations.

As an outlook for the future, the Director of OEA expressed the hope that IHEC keeps and sustains its credibility. It is important for IHEC not to be compromised, to stand as a strong institution, and remain efficient and professional whatever the political context. The loss of trust in IHEC will worsen the challenge of decreasing voter turnout. He also suggested that the political law in Iraq should be strengthened and emphasized the urgency for politicians to apply and respect the rules of democracy within their political parties. Finally, he called on the GEO Liaison Officers to continue contributing to the consolidation of democracy because it belongs to the Iraqi people and to define the rules of the game of democracy they want for their country.

Tajana Napier, Field Coordination Advisor, elaborated on the context of the mandate given for the implementation of the UNAMI Office of Electoral Assistance and explained how it was operationalized while highlighting the contribution of the GEOs in this process.



Figure 3: Tajana Napier speaking at the conference

The mandate of UNAMI OEA came from the UN Security Council Resolution 2576 with the request to assist Iraq in conducting free and fair elections. Implementing this mandate required monitoring work that was difficult in the security context of Iraq. Presence in each governorate and nationwide support for the IHEC lead to the idea of creating the position of Liaison Officers to work with the Election Offices of the IHEC in the governorates (GEOs). The recruitment was open only to the Iraqi nationals to represent OEA in GEOs. To enhance this support, OEA regional team offices were created in Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Kirkuk and Ninewa. This team of more than fifty-four staff includes regional advisors, elections officers, national staff, and GEO liaison officers. In total, twenty-one (21) GEOs Liaison Officers and eleven (11) UNV has been selected.

Liaison Officers maintained daily interactions with the GEO officials and reported to OEA regional electoral advisers. Information exchange and insightful reporting from the Liaison Officers served as eyes and ears of OEA in the field during the preparations for the elections. The pinnacle of their work is the daily report which, in turn, assisted regional advisors to understand the operational progress and needs of the GEOs for support and guidance. It was clarified to Liaison Officers that their mission was complimentary to the work of GEO officials, and not to overstep their function, which would limit Liaison Officers to carefully follow up on day-to day preparations, provide guidance and advisory.

Sammy Alfandika, Project Manager, shared his vision on the aspects of the project and the support that is expected from OEA.



Figure 9: Group exercise

“Support to Iraq electoral process: support to CoR election 2021 and capacity development” project that started in October 2020 was supposed to end in 2021. But due to the request of the IHEC, the project’s term was extended until December 2022. This project gained funding support from 12 partners such as USAID, Germany, Norway, France, Netherlands, European Union, Philippines, New Zealand, Denmark, Japan, United Kingdom, and Sweden.

The project is structured in four operation areas that include:-

○ the strengthening of the technical capacity of IHEC, delivering elections in a credible and professional manner

○ enhancing the transparency of the electoral process through great public outreach and information sharing by IHEC (this includes strategic communication, gender issues and women political participation)

○ conducting key electoral operations for the 2021 parliamentary elections

○ improving the capacity of the media as stakeholders in Iraq will provide inclusive media content on Iraq election as well as contents that counter disinformation.

Figure 5: OEA project operational areas

SECTION 3:

The Role of GEO Liaison Officers in supporting preparations before, during and after the E-Day.

Continuing the sessions, the next highlight was the discussion about the role of the GLOs before, during, and after election day. The discussion was organized in groups, with a mixed composition of staff - GLOs, and Regional Electoral Advisors.

Discussion in each group was facilitated through these three questions. These are the points that the groups highlighted from the experiences of the GLOs in the field.

What is your view on the major roles played by GLOs during elections?

- Coordination of the relationship and interaction with GEOs
- Regular reporting on the needs and gaps in the work of GEOs, where OEA's assistance would be relevant. Facilitation of the information sharing between GEO and OEA.
- Technical advice to GEOs
- Support during the preparations and simulation exercises.
- Monitoring CSOs activities.
- Supporting the UN monitoring team.

What are the major challenges and difficulties?

- Security and political issues.
- IHEC GEO's not clear understanding of the role of the GLOs.
- Distrust of GEOs to GLOs and constraints on information sharing.
- Insufficiency of the skills at the GEO level (e.g. IT skills).
- Insufficient gender balance in the team.
- Lack of collaboration with civic society organizations.
- Functional structure of GEOs.
- Difficulties in collecting data and information from GEOs.
- Delayed deployment in combination with limited knowledge/experience in the election.
- Inadequate onboarding (non-centralized).
- Limited access to GEOs due to hierarchy, misconception/limited understanding of OEA mandate.
- Impact of Covid-19 in the field.
- Conflict between the technical support provided by the GLOs and IHEQ HQ.

What are the good practices and lessons from these experiences?

- Build trust with the GEOs
- Improve communication skills
- Improve reporting skills
- Gain knowledge about election administration
- Gain experience in the electoral cycle
- Gain insight into the legal protection and inclusion of minorities, youth, women, and IDPs in the electoral process.
- Maintain professionalism.
- Daily presence of UN at GEOs in all sections and visiting international staff.
- Visiting the Voters' registration centers.
- Lead by example from female GLOs and recruitment of female staff.
- Added more experience in planning and time management.
- Improving coordination with GEOs.
- Building good trust and relationships with GEOs.
- More knowledge about the IHEC/GEOs.
- Find your way to develop your added value and access information
- Build trust
- UN presence facilitates sharing information between GEOs and OEA



Figure 6: Group discussion

SECTION 4:

Working with Counterparts and Electoral Stakeholders

In this conference section, GLOs and Regional Election Advisors shared their testimonials about building and facilitating relations with GEO counterparts and other stakeholders in the field.

Testimonial from Chera Talabani, Liaison Officer from Kirkuk governorate, shared her experience as a female staff working with the logistic unit in GEO Kirkuk. When she joined the OEA team, she was advised by her IHEC GEO colleagues to transfer to another unit as it was considered uncomfortable for women to work in the logistics. There was only one other female staff in the logistics unit, but her role was limited to administrative work, and she never visited the warehouse in her twelve years in the unit. Chera understood that it would not be easy to be in this job, yet she kept her motivation, and thanks to her determination, the willingness to learn, she was able to demonstrate through her example that women also are able to successfully work in logistics. Chera further underscored three elements that enabled her to perform well: communication, trust building and teamworking. Indeed, she communicated to her counterparts her role as Liaison Officer, and she developed trustful relations with the head of the unit and the other colleagues.

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In the beginning, it was very difficult to work. There was only female staff in the logistics unit, her role was limited to administrative work, and she never visited the warehouse in her 12 years of work. I communicated with the GEO team, built trust with the head of the unit.

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Figure 7: GLO from Diyala sharing her views

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This was my first electoral experience, my approach was to listen and learn more from the GEO officers. It has been a rewarding experience, I am committed to work more to improve the electoral process in Iraq

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Another testimonial from Yasir Abdullah Mutlaq, GEO Liaison Officer from Salah Al-Din described two challenges he faced as the new Liaison Officer without previous experience in the elections. The challenges were being new in the election field and collaborating with the GEOs counterparts who needed a clearer understanding of the role of a Liaison Officer. Yasir’s approach was to listen and learn more from the GEO officers and gain more knowledge on the issues and processes of the elections. He discussed various issues and built trustful relations with the GEO staff. Subsequently, on his proposal, Salah Al-Din GEO started preparation for an awareness activity aiming to promote the participation of university students in elections. For Yasir being Liaison Officer has been a rewarding experience that leads to his commitment to continue contributing to the improvement of the electoral process in Iraq, even after the project.

Testimonial of Regional Electoral Advisor, Carlos Servin Ugarte described his journey in Iraq since he joined in July 2021. With his international experience, the working environment in Iraq was different. When he joined his new assignment, he discovered that due to security issues he is, going to do a great part of his job on the phone. Carlos highlighted the instrumental role of the Liaison officers whose presence in the GEO contributed to facilitate the job.

The contribution of other participants to the discussion following the testimonials, also allowed us to conclude that all the Liaison Officers faced several challenges, which they overcame through various solutions. Many of them joined the assignment without previous experience in elections. But after this experience, their capacity grew and they are willing to continue expanding their knowledge in election and enhance their career in elections.



Figure 8: Carlos Servin Ugarte sharing his experiences and observations

SECTION 5:

Youth Engagement in Election

This conference section was linked to the research led by Swan Cho, a consultant on the engagement and participation of the Iraqi youth in elections.

Swan highlighted in her presentation the role of the youth in various aspects of life worldwide and described the context of the realities of youth in Iraq. 60% of the Iraqi population are youth which is an important resource for the development of Iraq. Young people played a key role in fighting ISIS in Iraq and youth were at the frontline of the Tishreen revolution. They remain politically engaged on social media platforms.

However, the same dynamism is not reflected in their participation in elections. They are reluctant, and many usually join the election boycott movement. As a result, voter turnout in the nationwide elections in Iraq continues to decrease. According to Swan, the key reason explaining youth hesitation to participate in the election is “disappointment and distrust.” The disappointment comes from two decades of bad governance, non-democratic practices among politicians, corruption, unemployment, etc. The break with the old corrupted system they were expecting didn’t happen. Then young people started considering elections as a part of the unreliable system, therefore, incapable of resulting in constructive reform. On top of it stands distrust of the electoral law and IHEC. The audience also pointed out some sociocultural factors hindering women’s participation

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SECTION 6:

GLOs and Operational Support

Reflecting on the work of the Planning and Operations section with the Liaison Officers in the governorates, Maciej Nawrot, Senior Operational Advisor, gave an overview of the operational management of the project and recruitment of Liaison Officers.

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Ali Khafaji, Logistics Officer shared his reflection on the logistics processes to organize the work in collaboration with Liaison Offices, particularly challenges with the long road missions, preparations, and arrangements for the events with the last-minute changes.

Sohail Gill, Covid-19 Compliance Specialist gave an overview of the Covid-19-related measures taken during the project implementation, restrictions, and compound life during the pandemic, including travel arrangements, etc.

Kevin Rodrigues, Planning and Support Officer, reflected on the planning of the processes, achieving the operational goals, the phases of planning and implementing, challenges of resistance to change, psychological difficulties, and technical problems during the preparations for the E-day.



Figure 9: Dr Aamir Arain, OEA director with GLOs from Kirkuk and Diyala

SECTION 6:

Lessons To Review and Areas for Further Focus in Improving Iraq's Electoral Processes

L leading to the conclusive session, participants worked in groups, discussing the three major areas for improving the electoral preparedness of IHEC for future elections. The results of the group discussion highlighted these areas as the most important:

- Training VRC and the polling staff with improved training materials and methods.
- Planning and announcement of election results.
- Outreach to other electoral stakeholders such as political parties, candidates, media, and CSOs.
- Digitalization of all the IHEC communication systems, the database for biometric cards.
- Improve financial management system.
- Improve voter education strategy and increase awareness of various aspects of elections.
- Delegation of power to GEOs and decentralization of IHEC.
- Improving communication between IHEC HQ and GEO levels.
- Strengthening gender mainstreaming at the GEO levels.

In closing of the conference, Dr. Aamir Arain, OEA Director, highlighted the significant role played and contribution made by the Liaison Officers of each governorate to the success of the CoR 2021 elections and in the aftermath of the elections.

Summarizing the outcomes of the discussion OEA Director identified three main issues that could be taken up to the attention of the leadership of the IHEC.

1 Empowerment of women and gender inequality when it comes to leadership.

2 Central planning – decentralization: guidelines at a higher level but allow the local government to readjust it according to local needs.

3 Building relationships with partners

Along with that conference was concluded with great appreciation for the critical work Liaison Officers and UNVs had delivered in the governorates. Also, the conference was another opportunity to express gratitude to Liaison Officers' services as part of the Support Elections in Iraq project that will be downsizing significantly in the coming months.

