



FORAS: Iraq Opportunities Program

CONTEXT

Unemployment, underemployment, and the absence of middle class economic opportunity combine to threaten Iraqi security and stability. In a country with a very high population of young and educated but unemployed people and extremely limited representation of women in the labor force, marginalized populations—especially those who are internally displaced—face enormous challenges in achieving economic security. To address these concerns, USAID/Iraq and FHI 360 have worked together to design *Foras*, a forward-looking, demand-driven program that offers a comprehensive approach to address the unemployment problem in Iraq, especially for these priority populations.

Iraq’s capacity to employ its young, but rapidly maturing workforce—nearly half of the country is aged 25 years, or younger—will be decisive for the health of its economy and society. *Foras* endeavors to serve the needs of both Iraqi employers and job seekers by strengthening intermediary actors, such as job placement and training agencies, and giving job seekers an easily-accessible venue to search for open positions.

At the same time, *Foras* will help broaden the future of Iraq’s private sector by supporting entrepreneurs, both emerging and established, with business training and strategic advice.

APPROACH

First, USAID-*Foras* consults with Iraqi businesses to determine the skills of their ideal workforce. The project then partners with an array of intermediary organizations—training institutions, job placement agencies—to equip job seekers with in-demand skills, and guide them to open positions. *Foras* leverages its partners’ resources to provide training and certification for job seekers, better preparing them to enter the job market.

To better connect job seekers and employers, *Foras* partnered with Microsoft and Silatech, a Doha, Qatar-based nonprofit organization, to create a web-based employment portal (www.foras-jobs.com), allowing job seekers to search through open positions while advertising their qualifications with a personal profile. As many job seekers will access the portal through a partner intermediary, the job seeker will also have close access to counseling and advice. The employment portal allows employers to perform targeted searches for qualified candidates among registered users. By texting “job” in Arabic, Kurdish, or English to 1025, Iraqi job seekers can sign up for a robust job matching service provided by *Foras*. Job seekers input information about their skills, experience, and location, and the 1025 SMS Service provides information about nearby vacancies that match their qualifications. The 1025 system,



OVERVIEW

The Iraq Opportunities Project (USAID-*Foras*, “opportunity” in Arabic), a two-and-a-half year project funded by the US Agency for International Development and implemented by FHI 360, seeks to connect Iraqi businesses with qualified workers, both alleviating unemployment and boosting the country’s fledgling private sector.

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

Award amount:
\$47 million

Period of Performance:
2013 - 2015

Location
Five governorates in Iraq: Erbil, Baghdad, Karbala, Najaf and Basrah

developed by *Foras* in collaboration with Silatech and MT2, a California-based telecommunications company, provides access to employment opportunities for Iraqis that lack internet access.

Cultivating Entrepreneurs, Boosting Business Finance

Foras will provide advice and mentorship to both Iraqi entrepreneurs and microfinance institutions, while standing up support services and networks that will endure beyond the project. For new or aspiring entrepreneurs, *Foras* will provide a comprehensive suite of business advisory services, including a concept assessment, training on basic business skills, and a crash-course in funding identification and marketing. For more established entrepreneurs, *Foras* offers higher-level mentorship, focusing on more sophisticated concepts like human resources management, and diversifying capital access for business expansion.

To ensure continuing support, *Foras* will help establish business counseling services, based at university career centers, employment intermediary partners, and nongovernmental organizations. The project will also foster connections between entrepreneurs in Iraq and the Middle East, creating a regional network where experienced entrepreneurs can share their hard-earned wisdom, and help ensure future generations of business innovators.

Even the smartest startup idea needs funding, and *Foras* supports Iraq's microfinance industry to make sure it's there. *Foras* works closely with Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) to manage risk, conduct field audits and facilitate required reporting. This will enhance the MFIs' long-term viability, and provide enduring microfinance for startup.

Focus on the Vulnerable

While years of violence have shaken the Iraqi workforce, some job seekers are more disadvantaged than others—the internally displaced, for example, or single mothers, or civilian victims of conflict. For these vulnerable groups, employment could pull them from the margins of existence.

In many of these cases, specific and targeted skills training can significantly improve a vulnerable job seeker's employability. These needs vary between populations and regions; *Foras* will seek opportunities in all activities to assist those who need it most, particularly by partnering with organizations with proven track records of helping vulnerable groups.

Focus on Internally Displaced People (IDP)

Due to recent insurgency and conflict in Iraq, many people have left their homes to find sanctuary in other areas of the country. This has led to a humanitarian crisis in Iraq with more than 1.8 million IDPs (UN estimate from September 2014) seeking refuge throughout Iraq. *Foras* is addressing the needs of IDPs using several key resources such as employability training, the jobs portal, I025 registration, job and training referrals, and soft skills development. *Foras* will also be providing M-learning training through Secure Digital (SD) card distribution in the camps, which will help provide the IDPs with the necessary skills to find employment. *Foras* will be hiring more than 130 local staff to work with IDPs, with all of these staff members coming directly from the camps. The *Foras* IDP initiative will work throughout Iraq with mobile teams to be based directly in the camps, legal clinics, and Government of Iraq offices.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

- *Foras* works in selected local catchment areas, dynamic economic hubs with the potential for new jobs and greater economic opportunity, and adopts a technology-enabled, information-driven approach to fast-track employment among vulnerable populations.
- Industry level information is used to close skill gaps in key sectors. *Foras* identifies the gaps between what is needed by larger employers and the capacity of education and training institutes to design and deliver courses to meet the demand for appropriately skilled workers.
- Throughout the project, *Foras* consistently addresses gender gaps and promotes employment and business growth for women and vulnerable populations.

USAID-*Foras* is an Associate Award under the FIELD-Support LWA, a cooperative agreement between USAID's Microenterprise and Private Enterprise Promotion Office and FHI 360 and its consortium of 24 development partners. Learn more at: www.microlinks.org/field-support

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