



FIRST PERSON

Broadcaster Embodies Modern Iraq

Small Business Development Center in Erbil turns employees into entrepreneurs.



Photo by David DeVoss, USAID-Tijara

“I used to be an employee who just followed direction. But one course at the Women Empowerment Organization gave me the courage to start my own business. Now I make the decisions.”

—Awaz Ahmed, owner and CEO of Radio Hawler in Erbil

During the two years Awaz Ahmed worked as a producer for Kurdistan Satellite Television she always felt vaguely unfulfilled. “My life largely consisted of doing what people told me,” she explained. “I had good ideas and wanted a life where my opinions would count.”

Her search for a more meaningful life led to the Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) in Erbil. One of 14 Small Business Development Centers sponsored by the USAID-Tijara Provincial Economic Development Program, WEO helps both men and women develop the business skills and vision necessary to secure gainful employment or start their own company.

Awaz and her husband enrolled in a five-day course called “How to Start a Business.” She learned how to write a business plan, create a budget and organize an office. She also left knowing how to recognize the difference between a great idea and a viable commercial enterprise. “The training taught me how to think strategically and trust my instincts,” says Awaz.

Awaz’ instinct told her to quit her job and pursue her passion for Kurdish classical music. So that’s what she did. She visited rural villages to record elderly musicians, and then began the arduous process of raising \$200,000 to start a radio station. Two years ago, Radio Hawler went on the air with a playlist dominated by Kurdish songs many listeners thought forgotten. “It’s a 1,000-watt station broadcasting 18 hours a day programmed for housewives and taxi drivers,” says Awaz. “I started the station for the music, not the money.”

But the money rolled in anyway. Awaz used it to start a recording studio, photo agency and graphics company that designs CD covers and posters for musicians she promotes on the radio. Today she has five full-time employees.

Awaz embodies a new breed of Iraqi entrepreneurs, people who have taken advantage of private sector initiatives introduced by USAID over the past eight years. Many of these beneficiaries are women who, like Awaz, head robust private sector enterprises seldom seen in decades past.