

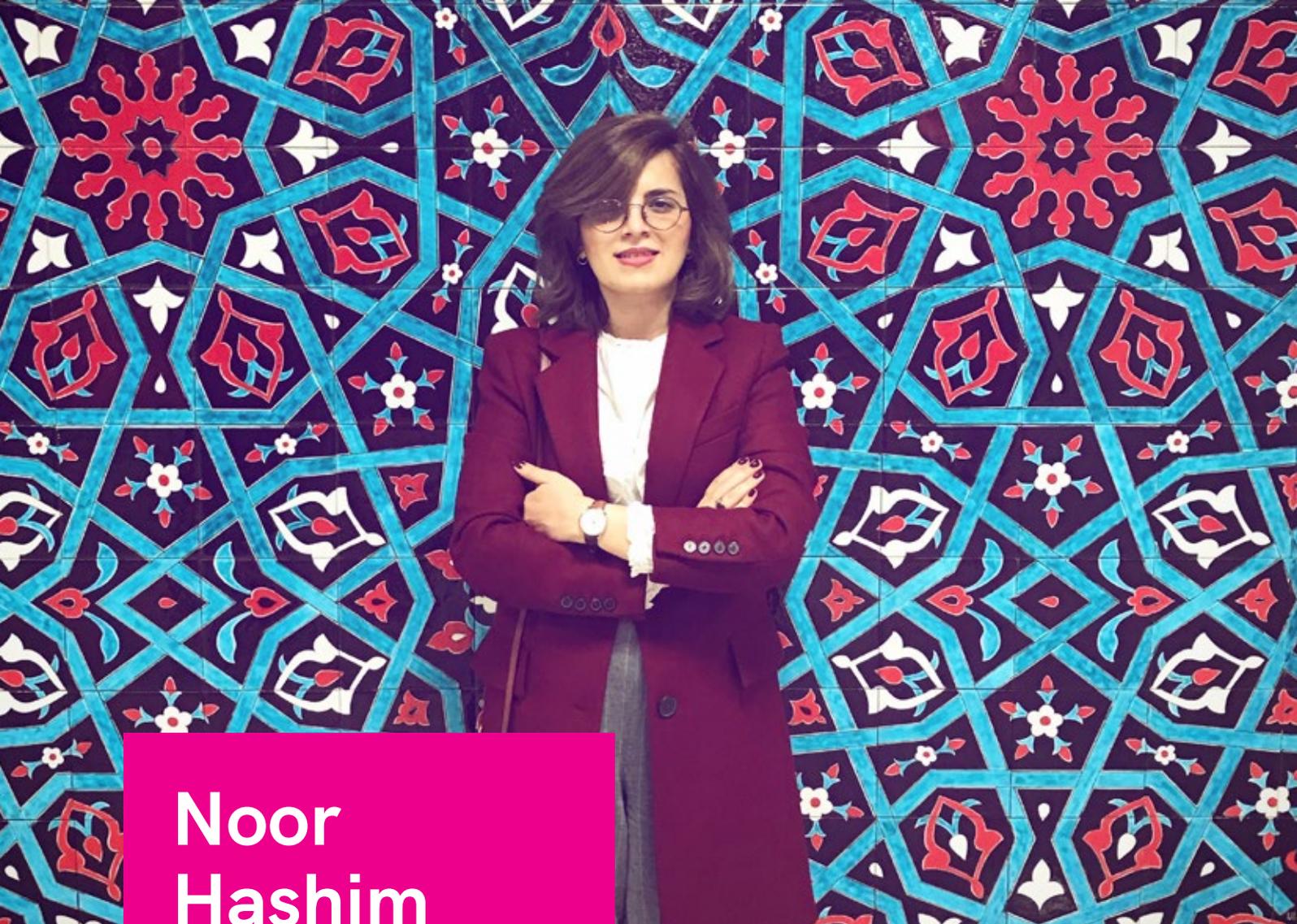




## Women from the Iraqi Ecosystem

The Iraqi business landscape is young and recovering from decades of instability and economic inconsistency. To revive it and push it forward, all of its gears have to be activated. An integral part of that landscape is women. They are an important key to unlocking the full potential of the Iraqi ecosystem.

Business LANDSCAPE, as part of its efforts to shine the necessary light on women and their inspiring journeys in Iraq, is presenting a series of profiles of women whose achievements made them stand out. Some success stories, amongst the many women's success stories, are presented here in their heroes' own words.



# Noor Hashim

Founder and CEO, Hili



My name is Noor Hashim, and I am a political science graduate with a passion for art, handicrafts, and design. I am a businesswoman invested in empowering culture, women, and entrepreneurship. In 2017, I managed to turn my dream into reality, and my own brand, Hili, came to light.

Hili, the Sumerian word for love, is a local Iraqi brand of authentic handmade products inspired by the Mesopotamian culture and heritage. Hili's mission is to spread awareness and celebrate Mesopotamian Civilization through timeless designs, empower artists, create employment opportunities, and support women to invest their artistic skills towards building their future.

Iraq is gifted with a lot of skilled artisans. Hili brings an array of traditional handmade crafts designed by regional artisans and craftsmen from across the country.

Hili has 25 - 30 freelance workers and artisans from different backgrounds and various governorates in Iraq who work on various lines of products. We also have staff members who work as Hili showroom runners and project coordinators. Hili specializes in handcrafted products, such as jewelry, souvenirs, home decor, and other ornaments, and has several product lines like Khoos products, ceramics, pottery, miniature statues, rugs, organic soap, and others.

Hili has been present at the Iraqi Duty-Free for the past three years, providing a wide range of products that reflect the rich heritage and culture of the country, promoting tourism.



Recently, Hili started a strategic partnership with Babylon Mall in Baghdad to invest in the Al Mutanabi Street section of the Bazaar floor for a percentage of the sales in return.

Hili is also working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to develop a national product and support a group of marginalized women and workers. This project involves producing a ton of Amber rice and packaging a ton of Iraqi tea to sell them at certain sale points.

In addition, Hili has collaborated with an Iraqi jewelry designer, Hajer Ghani, the daughter of renowned artist Mohamed Ghani Hikmat. As a result, Ms. Ghani has created and produced her jewelry collection with the help of a group of widowed women, and the products will be available to purchase at the Iraqi Duty Free.

Moreover, Hili worked with several non-government organizations to produce different lines of products. For example, Hili worked with IOM to manufacture a line of wooden toys and the United Nations Development Programme Accelerator Lab to create a collection of Eco Bags.

Hili has also taken part in Spotlight Iraq, a project of the Goethe Institut Irak that supports cultural projects through funding and capacity building and development, in addition to networking opportunities with professionals in that domain; with this support, we produced our line, Samawah Rugs.

Through the years and during the previously mentioned projects, Hili encountered many challenges, including funding, market prices, competition with imported goods, and the lack of awareness. Hili has been able to support many women in the ecosystem by providing them with employment opportunities and the potential to capitalize on their skills and give them a platform to showcase their artistry.



# Shumoos Ghanim

Founder, Holiveg  
Vocational Guidance and  
Counseling Manager - World  
University Services of Canada, Iraq



My name is Shumoos Ghanim. I have a master's degree in biotechnology and several years of experience with local and international NGOs. I work as a vocational guidance and counseling manager at World University Services of Canada, Iraq.

I have designed and developed the first vocational guidance and counseling (VG&C) approach that has been adopted by the Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs as a key service in the vocational training centers (VTCs) in many governorates across Iraq. In addition, I provide career counseling services to young Iraqis regarding their career path planning.

Moreover, I am the co-founder of Holiveg, a startup that provides vegan, healthy, organic, eco-friendly, and local products to Iraqi customers who seek a healthy lifestyle.

When I wanted to start planning my business, it was very hard in the beginning as a woman to communicate and engage with local suppliers. I always needed the presence of a man to support me in this journey. Which I believe is a great challenge to many women entrepreneurs that we face when launching our businesses.

Thus, it is important for women entrepreneurs to surround themselves with a good support system throughout their journey. It might sound cliché, but it is very true that one of the main challenges that we face as women in Iraq is the underestimation of our capabilities and potential. This limits our opportunities in access to employment and also means we need to work even harder to prove ourselves in the workplace.

I have once come close to not getting a job because one of the hiring committee members thought that I did not have it in me to handle the job. However, the rest of the committee gave me a chance to showcase my work potential which blossomed into many achievements. I believe this is a major challenge for many women in all different sectors in Iraq.

Through Iraqi Women in Business, I tried to provide free counseling services for women who feel lost or trapped in their careers or encounter economic/social challenges that prevent them from taking a step forward in their career path.

It is critical for women to support other women in order for our economic landscape to evolve and flourish. I also provided technical support for my female colleagues at work and motivate them to take ambitious steps to grow in their roles further and advance their careers.





# Maryam Allami

Project Advisor, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH



My name is Maryam Allami. I am a project management professional and business development consultant known in the community for my work supporting the Iraqi startup landscape. I am currently employed as a project Advisor for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ). In 2021, I served as a Business Development Coach in a UNITAR-funded program, volunteering to support women entrepreneurs in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa. Before returning to Iraq in 2017, I worked in an international position focusing on global business and financial markets.

In addition to my work, I am now pursuing an MBA at Heriot-Watt University, focusing on strategy. Since returning to Iraq, I have been monitoring and supporting the Iraqi entrepreneurial ecosystem through various approaches and mechanisms. Consequently, contributing to the collective efforts to improve the Iraqi economy, reduce the unemployment rate, and revitalize the private sector.

As a woman, I faced many challenges related to gender prejudice, which made working in Iraq an arduous endeavor that required additional hard

work to disprove these assumptions. However, it also opened my eyes to the various challenges women encounter and how I can advocate for them.

I have strived to include women in my work by supporting gender streaming and developing specific programs that incorporate a gender perspective. Hence, highlighting women's success stories and understanding their challenges to better address the needs of women in business.

As part of my efforts to enable and empower women, I have also joined a global team that has helped create a handbook on accelerating women-led businesses. In essence, this handbook can serve as a reference for applying the best international practices to ease the way for women to grow their businesses and navigate their way into the business landscape.

Despite the challenges we face as women in our daily lives, starting with movement limitations, preconceived perceptions, social pressure, and many other issues. We need to understand that our future and the future of our daughters lie within our hands, and only we can write a better narrative for a more inclusive ecosystem.



# Christine van den Toorn

Founder and President of the Iraq Fund for Higher Education (IFHE)  
Founder of Baghdad Business School



My name is Christine van den Toorn. I am the founder and president of the Iraq Fund for Higher Education (IFHE), a nonprofit foundation dedicated to creating new education and employment opportunities for Iraqi youth in Iraq and abroad. Several Iraqi colleagues and I have started our flagship project, Baghdad Business School (BBS), in October 2020.

BBS is a one-year program that prepares Iraqi university graduates for their careers and lives by teaching them essential English language and professional and business skills. Our first-class graduated last December 2021, and are all working in various fields - finance, HR, design, IT - in Iraqi startups, SMEs, and their own businesses. Our second cohort is in their second semester in Professional English and taking training in Microsoft Office and Career Services.

BBS aims to educate and empower all Iraqi youth. However, we pay specific attention to recruiting and admitting young women-around 40% of our first pilot class and 50% of our current second cohort is female. During the program, we prepare them to deal with and overcome the many

challenges and obstacles they face once in the workplace so that they can succeed. In addition, we try to prepare our male students to be good co-workers to their future female colleagues.

In BBS classes, participation is encouraged to build confidence and skills in our female students, as well as teamwork and to foster healthy professional engagement among all students. In addition, nearly half of our instructors, guest lecturers, and mentors are women who can serve as role models, helping our students navigate the ecosystem.

This year, through a cooperation with KAPITA and GIZ's Strengthening Participation of Women project, we are holding a monthly series of workshops, training, courses with gender experts and accomplished women professionals in Iraq and the region.

The cooperation aims to further equip our students for the workplace, such as dealing with harassment and other inequities and deficiencies like unequal pay, resources, and opportunities. In addition, one thing I learned while establishing BBS was that such endeavors need a strong network of professionals, hence, we will also establish a network of mid-and upper-level career women to propel and encourage younger Iraqi women and empower them to find their way to success.





# Ghina Taha

Acting HR Manager/  
HR Operations Specialist,  
General Electric



My mother still reminds me of things I used to say when I was a little girl, things that relate to independence in a way or another. I always used to say, “Mom! I cannot wait to graduate, work and receive my first salary!”. Little did I know back then that I would start work, literally, the day after my final exam in my senior year in college. I graduated from the college of linguistics, the French language department, and immediately started my career in Human Resources.

I believe women in action (that’s what I like to call working women) are under certain expectations from society and culture. We are supposed to juggle multiple props that keep increasing over time. In today’s world, women are as responsible as men are when it comes to providing for their families and supporting their needs. Also, we have other responsibilities at home, some with children, many of us wear different hats on the same day.

When COVID-19 pandemic hit, most companies transitioned to work remotely from home, the whole world witnessed what it means to be a working woman.

In addition, we face major challenges on daily basis, such as security, mobility, and cultural limitations. Hence, we constantly need to be mindful of our safety while taking care of others.

However, Iraqi women in action are driven by ambition and resilience. They have always navigated their way through every challenge to participate actively in the ecosystem regardless of the countless barriers.

It has been a personal responsibility I am holding myself accountable for through my position is to educate, advise and empower women joining work or starting in a new place. I always encourage women to raise their voices and be vocal about how they feel to someone they trust or through designated channels of reporting at work when they are experiencing challenges or any type of discomfort that makes their workplace difficult to grow and prosper in.

It is our responsibility to address those issues to develop feasible solutions to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace and society.





# Safa Fadhil Jafar

Head of Exploration, UNDP Accelerator Labs

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Four years ago, Luvvie Ajayi Jones reflected that one way to leave the world a better place is to “get comfortable with being uncomfortable.” These words have resonated with me ever since as an approach for women to thrive, own their potential, and induce change in society. Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable does not merely mean getting out of our current comfort zone only, but continuously doing so. We live in a society with many social and cultural limitations. Hence, our comfort zones are already pre-set for us. Most of the time, leaving these zones is an overwhelming experience that can sometimes be scary. We need to get comfortable with crossing lines and taking risks to overcome these issues. That is how we can create a rumble that shakes the societal barriers, causing the status quo to crumble down.

I have an oxymoron when it comes to continuously investing in my learning journey, which can seem, and is at times, uncomfortable. However, it is one of the most fulfilling decisions, enabling me to reshape my personality.

At the age of 17, I decided to venture into uncertainty and partake in breaking the boundaries set for women. I moved around the world, lived in three different cities, and studied

various topics ranging from business and finance, economic development, innovation, international relations, and public policy.

Capitalizing on my potential is only the starting point, then I put this knowledge to the test by taking on challenging roles. By the age of 25, I was the youngest and only female board member at one of Iraq’s biggest publicly listed companies, Baghdad Soft Drinks, Pepsi Co. Later, I transitioned to being an Assistant to the President of Iraq. The challenges I faced in these roles sculpted my personality and broke the “risk-averse” mentality I had. Currently, I am diving into another challenging role as the Head of Exploration at UNDP-Accelerator Lab in Iraq to take a part in supporting fellow women in the ecosystem.

Getting along with being uncomfortable is demanding; it requires persistence, courage, patience, and the ability to endure challenges. Nevertheless, once we achieve that transformation, we can empower ourselves as women to induce structural changes in our society and leave the world a better place for all.

It is worth mentioning that this piece is a brief manifestation of my own journey. Many courageous Iraqi women have found different paths to get uncomfortable and change the status quo. I give my utmost respect to all our approaches and efforts.

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# Safwa Salim

Research Associate, KAPITA  
Business Hub  
Executive Editor, Business  
LANDSCAPE

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I am Safwa Salim, a research associate at KAPITA Business Hub, a private sector company that aims to empower small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through investment, research, incubation, acceleration, and market development program.

I am also the executive editor of the Business LANDSCAPE magazine, a quarterly publication that aims to shed light on the Iraqi private sector, its challenges, developments, investments, and the entrepreneurial scene and serves as a platform for the Iraqi ecosystem. Like many students graduating high school in Iraq, my supposed career path was determined by the grades-based education system coupled with the social standards that glorify working in the medical field and view the public sector as the main driver for professional stability.

I was enrolled in the college of dentistry before I made my decision to drop out and follow a path that I was passionate about. After an arduous process, I started pursuing a main major degree in Business Management abroad, where I obtained a merit scholarship in Istanbul and graduated with high honors. During that, I was also able to pursue a minor in Entrepreneurship in Lille, France. However, as a Middle Eastern

woman, living abroad and venturing into those fields were not considered very suitable and mostly was frowned upon.

I believe that the challenges women face today stem from a lot of societal boundaries and rigid, outdated structures that we are deemed to abide by. We are often set to follow certain paths and achieve goals that are expected of us, and live up to someone else's idea of success.

It is on rare occasions that we are encouraged to navigate our own paths and explore our options. Our futures are often tied to finding career paths that do not steer us far off our comfort zones and that are more likely to be stable. It is our responsibility to push those boundaries, mitigate those challenges, and lift those external pressures. Thus women can write their own success stories in their chosen paths.

Through working in research, a field that is still untapped in Iraq, I am striving to comprehensively understand and analyze the Iraqi ecosystem, its private sector, market, and entrepreneurial scene and draw on data-driven findings and conclusions that will lay the foundation for its development and prosperity. In addition to bridging the existing gaps, and identifying opportunities where we can empower and support more youth and women to delve into this scene and take part in its growth.

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# Ranya Sabah Bakr

Country Manager, Viamo

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My name is Ranya Sabah Bakr. I am the Country Manager of Viamo Iraq and a Research Fellow of the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS).

I am an Iraqi entrepreneurship and innovation professional, holding a master of science in Innovation Management and Entrepreneurship from Bournemouth University in the United Kingdom as a Chevening Alumna, and a bachelor’s degree in Architectural Engineering from Al-Nahrain University in Baghdad.

Prior to that, I worked for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GIZ since 2018 for both Strengthening the Participation of Women in the Rehabilitation and Peace Process Project in Iraq as an Advisor for Entrepreneurial and Economic Empowerment and the Private Sector Development program as a Startup Promotion and Policy Development

Advisor where I co-led a nationwide startups competition named INTILAQ.

Additionally, upon my graduation in 2017, I co-founded a co-working space for architects in Baghdad called STOREY. I was also a Stakeholder Advisor and a management team member of the Innovation for Development project by UNDP Iraq.

I am a strong advocate for international collaboration and exposure, which helped me participate as a speaker for the Global Entrepreneurship Week in Iraq and the United Kingdom.

In addition, I was the only woman participant from Iraq in the first cohort of UNLEASH in Denmark where my team won the bronze award in the category of Urban Sustainability. Moreover, I was part of the first group of fellows to participate in the United Nations Institute for Training and Research’s Entrepreneurship program in Japan. I later became a trainer for the same program the following year.



Having said that, taking on strenuous tasks, shifting careers from my primary degree, and challenging social norms was not always smooth sailing. However, the key to tackling these challenges lies in differentiating between internal motivation and external pressure.

Most women (myself included) face internal challenges such as doubt, guilt, and social anxiety that naturally come with high ambition more than external ones such as social bias. Therefore, I strongly believe in the power of mental health in helping us all to overcome the challenges of work and life.

Lastly, as a believer in Human-Centered Design, and as a woman, we are blessed with the gift of empathy, for that, it is crucial for me to empower and support other women in my daily practices, from purchasing my goods from women-led businesses to building a genuine connection with women in leadership positions, supporting women in the ecosystem has become a habit and a ritual for me in my job and daily life, hoping to see more women breaking their internal and external barriers and benefit the 'landscape' through their offering.

