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Lessons in Academic Rescue: An International Higher Education Response in Post-war Iraq

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THE presence of a thriving and secure academic and scientific community is essential to the stability of any country. Higher education and learning support a sound labor market, drive technological and scientific innovations, lead to medical advancements, and contribute to civil society and a better educated and informed populace. On the global level, this prepares a nation to engage, compete, and collaborate with international partners—offering more opportunities for the exchange of knowledge. As these factors are essential to a prosperous society in today’s world, the consequences of an attack on a country’s intellectual capital can be dire. When innovation and learning are interrupted—no matter the cause—decreasing productivity and increasing barriers to accessing the international scientific community will leave long-lasting effects. In essence, a threat to a country’s academic community is a threat to its security and often the stability of its geopolitical neighborhood.

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Modern threats to science, learning, and academic freedom take many forms, including censorship, surveillance, imprisonment, and violence against academics. One way to protect scientific communities from attack is by providing safe havens to threatened academics outside of their country of threat. The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF), launched in 2002, is a permanent program to respond to individualized, acute, and large-scale emergencies. The program builds on IIE's efforts to protect academic freedom since its founding in 1919. From the Bolshevik Revolution to Nazi persecution of scientists during World War II to current crises, IIE has assisted scholars and students from any field in danger throughout the world. IIE has also participated in rebuilding higher education in countries post-conflict and in transitional phases. The experience of IIE-SRF in Iraq following the 2003 war offers lessons for ensuring that the provision of immediate refuge also supports scientists in their work. Through strong partnerships with host academic institutions in the region, scientists can continue to be productive and develop new skills. Once the threat diminishes, these scientists can return with new skills, which can help rebuild their home country and avoid "brain drain."

Iraq's Academic Emergency

In the case of Iraq, recent decades have witnessed a series of serious challenges to the country's academic and scientific community. The higher education sector flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, after which the country experienced a large-scale departure of thousands of highly skilled individuals during the 1980s and 1990s¹ that coincided with an eight-year military conflict with Iran and an increasingly centralized political system and totalitarian society. Forced military service and the exodus of many from the Iraqi professoriate and professional class exacerbated the impact on Iraq's academic community—limiting the number of people who could access higher education.

In 1991, soon after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations and various Western countries imposed sanctions on Iraq that caused the scientific community to suffer further. Institutions reduced the salaries of faculty members, scientists faced a shortage of research materials, and government spending on education substantially declined. Furthermore, those who were able to pursue further studies faced restrictions: for example, your family background began to be more important than your academic potential in terms of access to educational opportunities. Individuals out of favor with the Baath regime were unable to travel and were denied entry into universities.²

As a consequence of the 2003 war in Iraq, the educational infrastructure was further degraded when many laboratories, classrooms, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions were looted or destroyed. In 2003 alone, "approximately 61 universities and college buildings were war damaged,"³ and this increased drastically to include 84 percent of all higher education buildings by 2005.⁴

However, even with the far-reaching destruction and instability suffered in these events, most universities reopened within a month of the end of the official military engagement in May 2003. The real crisis proved to be with the scholars and professors who lost their positions or, worse, their lives.

Academics and doctors were either killed as a result of general violence or fell victim to a targeted campaign of murders aimed at the educated class. More than five hundred Iraqi professors have been assassinated and many thousands more have fled the country⁵ since 2003, leaving an overwhelming void in the Iraqi academic community. Scholars have been killed in targeted bombings on or near their university campuses; others have been stabbed to death or shot. Many of the attacks took place in professors' offices and homes. Some were warned while some were not. Their families have also been targets of kidnappings and murder.

Targeted attacks against academics peaked in 2006 and 2007, during the height of sectarian violence in Iraq. Hundreds of academics were killed and militants circulated a hit list identifying more than six hundred scholars. Many of the attacks occurred in cities of mixed beliefs, both in Sunni and Shia neighborhoods. While the pace of assassinations has slowed since the peak, they have unfortunately not ended. In 2011 and 2012, the media reported more than twenty-five individual assassinations or attacks at universities. Medical professors and researchers were particularly hard hit during this period, exemplified by the March 2011 high profile killing of the dean of the college of medicine of a major Baghdad university, an incident that shocked the university community and was denounced by Iraq's prime minister.

In the first six months of 2013, there were another half a dozen incidents affecting professors and university campuses. Perhaps as a harbinger for the second half of the year, a University of Baghdad professor was killed on July 1 when a bomb planted in his car exploded. The UNESCO Iraq Office issued a press release in early July condemning the incident. The year has also witnessed a heightening of general insecurity. Looking at the particularly violent month of July 2013 alone, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq reported more than 1,000 people killed. This year, car bombs have killed dozens of people at a time, typically at heavily populated venues, such as mosques and internet cafes. This uptrend in violence has received international attention, with news outlets publishing pieces on the attacks and recalling the violence of six or seven years ago.

At the height of the targeting, IIE-SRF was faced with a continual flood of applications from Iraqi professors who were desperate to flee their conflict-torn country. It was soon apparent that this was the largest academic emergency since the crisis that Nazi persecution in Europe caused in the 1930s. In 2007, after an urgent appeal from Iraq's then minister of higher education and scientific research to protect the country's professoriate, IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund implemented the Iraq Scholar Rescue Project. IIE-SRF has received nearly 1,800 requests for assistance from Iraqi scholars, has vetted more than 500 complete applications for

the IIE-SRF Selection Committee to evaluate, and has provided more than 420 year-long academic fellowships to more than 265 Iraqi academics.

Lessons Learned from Efforts in Iraq

Drawing from the best practices that emerged from IIE-SRF's experience with academic emergency work, the program's efforts in Iraq were heavily informed by guiding principles such as finding adaptable and speedy solutions for scholars facing deteriorating conditions, leveraging fellowship support through matching grants from host universities, and building strong networks of partner institutions. However, as the cadre of Iraqi scholars involved with the program grew, IIE-SRF began to learn new lessons about what works best when dealing with large numbers of threatened scholars facing similar situations, with a mind to future efforts to assist scholars to return home when possible. Over the six years since the Iraq Scholar Rescue Project began, programming has evolved and expanded to meet the needs of the cohort of at-risk Iraqi scientists. Through these experiences, IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund has learned valuable lessons regarding the implementation of a large-scale response to a national academic emergency.

Returning Knowledge

By offering temporary fellowships away from the source of threat, IIE-SRF fellows are supported outside their home country for up to two years. However, "brain drain" can be a concern when highly skilled individuals leave their home country. Of course, this conversation changes in the context of scholar rescue, as a professor saved is inarguably better than a life lost, even if that individual must leave their home country temporarily. However, the concern remains that relocating highly educated individuals from their home country deprives that country of important human capital.

Throughout the course of the Iraq Scholar Rescue Project, fellows have reported maintaining professional ties to students and faculty colleagues back home through a variety of methods during their fellowships, despite being outside their home country. They often remain actively engaged with their home universities, participating in peer review of articles or working on joint research projects with Iraqi colleagues. They also send research papers and resources to their home universities and stay in touch with their students—continuing to remotely supervise thesis completion and other graduate-level research, sometimes by simply communicating via text messaging.

Learning to harness scholars' interest in continuing connections with Iraq, the project introduced programming to facilitate collaboration among Iraqi academics in the country with their counterparts abroad, thus mitigating the negative effects of having a sizeable in-exile professoriate. The project added a remote learning component, which captures academic lectures by fellows in the diaspora for

distribution and presentation at universities throughout Iraq. In the first phases of the activity, lectures of senior IIE-SRF fellows were filmed and recorded on DVD, which were then screened at Iraqi universities. The lectures made their debut at the end of the academic year in May 2010. Over the course of the pilot year, these lectures benefited an estimated 2,500 Iraqi students at more than a dozen institutions in fields as diverse as pediatrics, environmental biotechnology, and trauma psychology. Administrators in Iraq emphasized the importance of the lectures in filling the gaps in material in many core university courses, and some universities requested copies of lectures for their institutions' libraries.

The incomplete professor-student interaction afforded in this arrangement was a clear limitation to the success of the remote learning activities, as the project relied upon professors at Iraqi universities to answer student questions and facilitate class discussions. Furthermore, staffing in Iraq to deliver DVDs and report on the lecture screenings was a challenge, particularly as the project endeavored to reach universities in dispersed areas of the country. To overcome these challenges, starting with the 2011 academic year, the project began facilitating live lectures of Iraqi professors living abroad to Iraqi classrooms via videoconferencing technology. Lessons now can be much more interactive, better allowing professors unable to return to Iraq to educate the next generation of Iraqis.

As an example of leveraging the knowledge-sharing opportunities facilitated through the project and its remote learning opportunities, two fellowship "alumni"—one who returned to Baghdad and one who is living in Amman, Jordan—have collaborated to design and co-teach an advanced engineering course. The professors coordinate lesson plans and alternate lecturing duties based on their specializations, with lectures from the scholar in Amman delivered via videoconferencing.

While many universities in Iraq have participated in these activities, some of the most active partners are Kufa University in the Najaf Governorate one hundred miles south of Baghdad and Al-Mustansiriya University and Al-Nahrain University in Baghdad. As reliable videoconferencing is not available at all Iraqi universities, DVD lectures continue to be a component of remote learning activities.

Importance of Training

Iraqi scholars—whether in exile or not—have been denied opportunities as a result of decades-long war, sanctions, and state-imposed travel restrictions. These limitations have stagnated advancements in certain fields and left Iraqi academics at a disadvantage in the international scientific arena, unable to access international conferences, training opportunities, and essential resources for research and publication.

To address some of these challenges, the IIE-SRF project has developed activities designed to expose program participants to the latest scientific innovations, pedagogical resources, and academic debates and practices by providing training,

networking, and professional development opportunities. The project convenes groups of fellows for tailored professional training workshops and provides funding for things like English language courses, computer training, and proposal and curriculum vitae writing classes in order to further the rebuilding of Iraq's higher education system.

Additionally, the project has coordinated a series of training-based conferences on various higher education topics. Six of these biannual events have taken place to date, including five in Iraq. Among past conference themes are higher education quality assurance, U.S.-Iraq university linkages, and modern teaching methodologies and excellence in university teaching. Planning is underway for additional events.

By providing travel grants to bring fellows together with faculty and university administrators in Iraq, IIE-SRF helps reorient displaced Iraqi scholars with their counterparts in Iraq, while also providing important skill enhancement and capacity building activities. The conferences allow for networking and discussion of possible employment opportunities or scientific collaboration with universities in Iraq. This prepares scholars for repatriation and fosters linkages and contact between scholars outside and inside the country. Illustrating this, during one IIE-SRF conference in Erbil, Iraq, a professor who had spent the previous decade working outside the country was offered a job at a private university in Baghdad, an offer that led to his repatriation.

Fellows may also receive grants to fund attendance at international academic conferences, where they benefit from the opportunity to reconnect and network with international academics in their fields of specialization. These opportunities may help to better position fellows for meaningful international collaboration that can benefit Iraq when they eventually return. As an example, a fellow was recently supported to attend an annual neuro-ophthalmology conference in the United States. The scholar had been trained as an ophthalmologist in Iraq, and later gained experience in neuro-ophthalmology (a subspecialty not widely taught in the scholar's home region) through a fellowship position. After completing further training, the scholar hopes to partner with medical colleges in Iraq and begin efforts to bring the study of neuro-ophthalmology to the country.

It is clear that the cohort of project fellows is eager for opportunities to attend conferences, present papers, and publish in the international scientific arena. However, this eagerness is not without its challenges, particularly as the academic community grapples with the situation of unscrupulous companies more interested in financial reward than academic integrity. One of the recurrent difficulties with encouraging fellows to network and share their work is the phenomenon of prestigious-sounding conferences and predatory open-access publishers that charge high fees for their services. Such questionable organizations have attracted numerous Iraqi scholars keen to publish and present work. While some scholars

have paid the price, the project has been active in sharing resources and guidelines on how to assess journals before agreeing to high publishing fees.

Regional Partners

While partnering universities, colleges, and other institutions of higher learning all over the world have generously opened their institutions to IIE-SRF Iraqi scholars, there has been a particular focus on engaging partners in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. More than sixty institutions in Bahrain, Egypt, the Iraqi Kurdish Region, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates have hosted scholars, allowing many Iraqi academics to assume teaching and research positions close to their home country in places with strong linguistic and cultural similarities to Iraq. In terms of logistics, certain places in MENA stand out as key host countries because of the likelihood of scholars quickly being able to obtain visas or residency.

Jordan has been the leading host country, in part because of the invaluable support from the Jordanian Royal Family, providing temporary sanctuary to 40 percent of project fellows. In Jordan and other host countries in the region, fellows and their accompanying family members can quickly integrate in the host community. One of the reasons Jordanian universities and research institutions have remained such strong partners, welcoming fellows into their departments year after year, is the expectation of high quality work. As a testament to the mutual benefit to both host institution and rescued scholar, one Jordanian university has hosted fifteen fellows to date. Another reason placement of fellows in Jordan has been so successful is due to continuous staff presence in Amman, allowing for constant contact with host universities and scholars in the region, bridging the gap between our two continents.

Some countries in the region would be suitable hosts because of proximity and cultural ties to Iraq, but issues, such as visa challenges or political instability, effectively shut the door on placement. Take the most recent example of Syria. More than ten fellows had temporary positions at institutions in Syria in earlier days of the project. However as the country destabilized, this quickly changed. Instead of supporting scholars to live safely in Syria, IIE-SRF began providing emergency funding for scholars—Iraqi and Syrian—to be able to escape the violence.

Another challenge in partnering with regional hosts is the fellowship model itself. IIE-SRF fellowship support by policy is matched financially by the host universities that welcome the threatened scholars into their communities. However, in order for academic institutions in MENA to absorb many threatened Iraqi scholars, the matching support element had to be waived. Additionally, some of the standard outreach messaging needed to be changed. While host institutions in Western Europe or the United States, as examples, are typically very interested in learning about the threats rescued scholars have faced and wish to partner

with IIE-SRF in part for humanitarian reasons, it is sometimes more sensitive to underscore the scholars' personal challenges to partners in MENA, and therefore the project emphasizes their academic experience and credentials.

Moving from "Drain" to "Gain"

Recognizing the essential need to protect national academic communities and support scholars returning home to restore and rebuild higher education structures when appropriate, the project began to facilitate program participants' voluntary return to Iraq when and where possible. Assistance with travel costs is offered to ensure that prohibitive costs do not prevent scholars and their families from returning home. The project also offers housing assistance to those who wish to repatriate to Iraq but do not feel safe to return to the homes from which they fled. Similar to IIE-SRF's overall rate of return, just over 40 percent of Iraqi fellows returned home within five years of the completion of their fellowships. Numerous project alumni have returned to their former positions, with at least ten having since been promoted to leadership positions. Included in this group are a university president, vice chancellor, dean, and a handful of departmental heads.

Historically, the majority of project alumni who have repatriated to Iraq spent their one- or two-year fellowships at institutions within the MENA region. Placing scholars at host universities in the MENA region remains a priority for the program. Regional placement enables fellows to keep in touch with their home campuses and colleagues more easily, integrate into their host environments quickly, and easily transition back upon returning home.

For those scholars who have not yet been able to return to Iraq on a permanent basis, the project developed programming to provide opportunities for short visits to Iraq for fellows to conduct "academic tours." These tours give scholars the chance to visit Iraq for a short period in a professional capacity and provide specialized workshops and lectures at universities and research centers. Much like the remote learning and lecture series, this activity has been particularly successful for senior professors and advanced scientists who feel they may not be able to return to Iraq to live in the near future, but have gained specialized knowledge during their time outside Iraq that can be of great benefit to their Iraqi colleagues and students. Often times, the workshops and lectures delivered by project fellows are not covered in any part of the extant curriculum in Iraq. IIE-SRF continues to see a growing interest among fellows to take part in this activity. These workshops and lectures appear to be increasingly popular for the individuals who are interested in eventually returning home.

Engaging Alumni

There are many programmatic challenges involved in implementing a project that is simultaneously operating in both "rescue" and "rebuilding" phases, with various funding sources, no permanent staff in Iraq, and beneficiaries who often

have complex personal situations and have experienced great instability and often traumatic events. Adding to this are the complications of changing circumstances in Iraq, not only with respect to security, but with respect to the higher education system. Some of the external elements that have most impacted the efficiency of the project have been changes within the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which is the employer of the vast majority of fellows. As an example, new restrictions on sabbatical approvals for Iraqi faculty members presented a real challenge when fellows began requesting placements in Western European and North American countries. Although the purpose of the fellowship is to expeditiously find safe positions for threatened scholars, if fellows fail to obtain prior leave from their positions in Iraq, they may not have positions to return to if circumstances change and they wish to repatriate in the future.

One way to stay ahead of the moving pieces has been to maintain close connections with a number of Iraq Scholar Rescue Project alumni, and especially with those who have been able to return to Iraq and resume their work there. In fact, the repatriated alumni who have assumed administrative roles and positions at Iraqi universities since returning provide helpful insight as to the workings of the Iraqi system—in everything from understanding the best time to schedule a training conference in Iraq around the exam schedule to learning which departments have the necessary videoconferencing equipment to participate in the project's remote learning lectures. Alumni also spread the word about the project, disseminating information about how to apply for fellowship support to colleagues who are facing risks. They also report on violence and security issues affecting Iraqi universities that are either not covered or not well detailed in the media.

Now, as the project goes through an independent program evaluation, current fellows and alumni are providing significant levels of helpful feedback. A comprehensive survey sent to all project alumni will serve as the primary quantitative data collection tool for the evaluation, which seeks to assess the impact of the program on the rescued Iraqi scholars, on Iraqi higher education more broadly, and to formally identify best practices and strategies for response programs to academic emergencies.

Future Challenges and Hope

Ten years after the 2003 war, the scientific and academic community in Iraq is slowly but surely rebuilding. The Iraqi government has expressed a keen interest in developing Iraq's higher education and scientific research sectors and gaining international recognition for its universities. Funding for tens of thousands of scholarships has been announced for Iraqi students to gain graduate degrees abroad and return to Iraq to build capacity for the next generation. Additionally, scholars are showing an interest in linking with the international academic

community, improving quality assurance in higher education, updating curricula, and modernizing teaching and evaluation techniques and technological resources.

At the same time, however, the security situation in Iraq remains fragile and the project continues to receive reports of violence at higher education institutions and against academics and students. Yet today, academics are not leaving the country in the numbers they once did, and the program's activities focus more and more on rebuilding and repatriation efforts. All the while, IIE-SRF has been overwhelmed with applications from new academic emergencies as scholars in Syria and other areas of conflict seek assistance.

As we confront these new crises, it is important to consider the lessons from the Iraqi experience and how they can be applied in other country contexts when scholars are threatened to ensure that scholars are protected and science and learning may continue during challenging times. In this pursuit, one thing to be mindful of is the issue of scale, as the Iraq Project model may be less pertinent for less pervasive situations. With Iraq, the project learned that amassing a network of regional partners accelerates rescue efforts and leads to the creation of a safe haven close to home, but these efforts may not be as critical given a situation, for example, of five threatened scholars as opposed to hundreds.

The model of regional partnerships may also have to be altered in view of the overall stability and capacity of the region in question. While IIE-SRF is now extending efforts to secure placements within the MENA region for threatened Syrian scholars, it is proving to be a substantial challenge, with countries in the region unable or unwilling to absorb Syrian scholars en masse because of the political complexity of the Syrian crisis or instability in their own countries. IIE-SRF has also attempted at various times to partner with certain African countries to provide sanctuary to threatened scholars from fragile state situations in other parts of Africa, but there have been impediments, including cultural and academic discrimination. Other dynamics, such as the number of higher education institutions in a given safe haven country, could limit the success of a full regional-based approach. It is clear that, despite the benefits of keeping scholars in their home region, barriers to applying the model efficiently may necessitate different methodologies.

Regardless of factors like scale or regional concerns, important lessons learned from the crisis in Iraq will be useful in assisting scholars who have current or future need. Three aspects of the project model that could and should be applied widely when funding permits are returning knowledge to a scholar's home country, providing training that will enable scholars to continue to improve their skills, and supporting opportunities for scholars to reconnect and network internationally in their fields of specialization. Regardless of where academics are threatened—from Iran to Ethiopia, Sri Lanka to Zimbabwe—these topics are key and can be adapted in many different circumstances. Together, these measures will allow scholars to

network, build their skills, and help to contribute to the academic community back home, even during times of crisis. **SD**

Endnotes

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