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Educators in Syria discuss school year start amid political turmoil

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy



Theresa Huck, cofounder of the Iraqi Student Project, conducts a session of the Writers' Workshop in Damascus. (Photos courtesy Iraqi Student Project)

Like many educators, Gabe and Theresa Kubasak spent the first part of September preparing for a new school year. They did so, however, under unusual circumstances.

Four years ago, the American couple founded the Iraqi Student Project (ISP), a program that seeks undergraduate education in the U.S. for young Iraqis displaced by war and ongoing violence in their homeland. As refugees in Syria and Jordan, these students cannot attend university there.

Located in the Syrian capital of Damascus, ISP is now operating in a country that is in the middle of a brutal crackdown with pro-reform protests eliciting violent government repression.

I recently questioned Huck and Kubasak, via email, on how the turmoil was affecting their work. Here is an edited version of our interview:

NCR: Damascus has been described as "comparatively quiet" since the uprisings in Syria began last spring. What are you seeing?

GT: We are completing preparations for our new academic year, processing student applications, conducting interviews, talking with parents. When we look out the window we see folks in cars and men driving trucks and a horse pulling a cart with containers of gas used for our cooking stoves.

While taking the laundry down we saw fathers and sons, uncles and grandfathers walking up the street to attend the mosque up the street. It is quieter than usual, yet after afternoon prayer some children were out playing on the sidewalk.

We plan to take a walk to the juice bar and probably, when we pass the squares and parks, we'll see groups of three to five young to middle-aged men apparently just standing around. They aren't. ?

How has ISP been affected by the uprisings? Have they triggered anxiety among your students who themselves fled a country in turmoil?

GT: Some Iraqis here say: "Not this again! We've gone through this and once is enough." But still, only a few seem to have gone back to Iraq because the situation there is in many ways far worse just in terms of daily life.

Our students dealt well with the situation last spring and were very wise about some adjustments we made to our schedule.

Our apartment, which is the classroom four or six hours for six days of the week, is fairly central and in this immediate area we have not yet had violence.

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If these uprisings and the violent reaction to them have done anything, it is to get people talking. [Our] students testify to that since they speak Arabic and hear conversations.

But we can testify too, as many Syrian friends speak frankly to us. ? Many opportunities have been missed to make progress. It appears there is no plan anywhere.

But the failing economy may become some sort of pressure for resolution. Even that may take a lot of time. ?

Are you concerned that Western threat of sanctions against Syria might complicate the college application process for your students?

GT: The sanctions are not a threat but a reality. The U.S. has had sanctions on Syria for years, but they are ratcheting these up every day now. It affects us in various ways.

For example, in a move of unbelievable stupidity, the U.S. government -- through the Treasury Department's OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control) people -- has decreed that the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) can no longer be given in Syria. So, the ETS (Educational Testing

Service) in Princeton, N.J., will lose the revenue.



Young Syrians will either miss this test required for application to U.S. universities, or will have to spend

a good deal of money traveling to Beirut or Amman to take the test. Most of our students can't go to either country because they are refugees from Iraq.

Who gets hurt? The U.S. government seems to have learned nothing from the 12 years of sanctions on Iraq. Only the poor and the middle class get hurt. Not the government. The Syrian economy is hurting because the European and Arab and other tourists stopped coming, and because people are afraid to spend money.

The U.S. sanctions hurt healthcare, education and such, not the government. What the U.S. is doing is simply accentuating the greatest bond between the present regime and the Syrian people: anger at the U.S. There was no such bond in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Bahrain -- but here there is. These sanctions only make the people's antipathy to the U.S. greater. ?

Do you have any other comments that you wish to add?

GT: Syria is a good place of good people. It is hospitable, safe, tolerant, full of fruits and vegetables in their seasons. It is full of ancient ruins. It is modest. It has major problems with its economy, its education system (the median age here is 21), and its politics or lack of politics.

Yet these people took in Palestinians when they needed a home in 1948 and in 1967, then they took in a million-plus Iraqis since the U.S. invasion of 2003. In a population of perhaps 22 million, that is amazing.

This is the cradle of civilization, the place where the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions took root and eventually lived together pretty well. They have had the Baath Party since 1963 and presidents named Al-Assad since 1970. But the Baathists were a party of Muslims, Christians, communists, all sorts and they stood for a secular state and a Syrian identity.

Some things they did well, some things they didn't. It's complicated.

For more on ISP, see: <http://iraqistudentproject.org/>

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