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War in Syria causes Iraqi Student Project to fold up its tent -- for now

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

NCR Today

Gabe Huck and Theresa Kubasak, co-founders of the Iraqi Student Project, packed up and left Damascus, Syria, last weekend, their exodus compelled by the war in the country.

Gabe, the former director of Liturgy Training Publications in Chicago, and his wife, Theresa, an educator, have been advocates for the Iraqi people since before the U.S. invasion in 2003, traveling to Iraq and reporting on the consequences of the UN sanctions imposed in 1990. They moved to Damascus from New York in 2005 and founded ISP in 2007. Living off their retirement savings, they worked full-time to find and screen potential candidates for a program that places and prepares young Iraqi refugees for undergraduate study at American colleges and universities.

ISP literature describes the effort as something "practical, possible and important which a small group of Americans began as an act of reconciliation for Iraqi citizens." The embargo and the U.S. invasion, with its resulting violence, decimated Iraq's educational system, one of the best in the Middle East, and displaced 4 million Iraqis, 1 million of whom fled to Syria.

ISP responded to this "educide" by building something good. In five years, the program obtained scholarships to 37 American colleges and universities for more than 60 Iraqi students, 10 of whom graduated last year. (I am part of a local support group for one of two students enrolled in a college and university here in Worcester, Mass.) Given the enormity of need, ISP's accomplishments were a drop in the bucket, but a significant one.

As late as May, ISP was still persevering in Damascus. Gabe and Theresa sent a poignant letter describing how their students were valiantly continuing to gather for their literary circles to discuss the works of

American writers as civil strife in Syria intensified. The missive made me think of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi's memoir about her clandestine book club for women in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But as the sporadic uprisings in Syria morphed into civil war, Gabe and Theresa, a courageous couple by anyone's reckoning, decided they could no longer teach Iraqi students in the "dear city of Damascus." The situation in Syria, as well as several other factors, made their work impossible. In a letter to supporters, they wrote:

"We have lost many supports here including English-speakers who were often here to study Arabic and became our volunteer teachers and conversation partners. We have lost the cultural centers that provided help of many kinds from supplemental study for some students to a study/library/computer center for all the ISP students. Everything dealing with money has become more difficult in Syria. We have had to ask the students to live very close to our apartment in order to avoid travel delays, checkpoints. These last few months we have only two volunteer teachers, one from Australia and one from Norway. Both of them had to leave Syria last week and obtain new visas to return. We have had a hard time keeping our own residency here. And now we have no US embassy to interview our ISP students bound for college in the US. For their US visas they have to travel by bus to Baghdad or to Beirut and wait an unknown amount of time until their passports are returned with visas. This has taken much time and expense."

War is a remote phenomenon for most Americans, and as a result, we are clueless about its effect. Bombed buildings. Dead bodies. Lots of destruction. Our knowledge is vague and abstract. Yet for so many people around the world, war is the Great Interrupter. When it happens, the most ordinary endeavors, like getting an education, become complicated or impossible to achieve.

While ISP has closed its office in Damascus, staff and volunteers in the United States continue to assist students currently enrolled in American colleges. The organization is still fundraising for the ISP class of 2016, eight students who are scheduled to arrive in the States this month.

For more on the work of ISP, go to IraqiStudentProject.org.

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