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Syrian war stalls Iraqi Student Project

Megan Fincher | Nov. 23, 2013

When I hear the name of it I feel
everything in my body
trembling
because it reminds me of my
best days.
This word is Iraq.

-- Rita, Iraqi Student Project

The Iraqi Student Project[1] has sent 60 Iraqi refugees in Damascus, Syria, to U.S. colleges and universities since 2007. This fall, rather than nervously attending their first freshman classes, potential students are simply trying to survive Syria's war-torn streets.

Gabe Huck and Theresa Kubasak traveled to Iraq four times during the era of the U.S.-U.N. sanctions in the 1990s. In 2005, the U.S. couple retired from their jobs and moved to Syria, where nearly a million Iraqis were refugees.

With no legal rights to obtain work, and no financial aid to attend Syrian universities, young Iraqis languished in Damascus. Their educational prospects in Iraq were similarly hopeless.

"Eighty-four percent of the infrastructure in Iraqi higher education institutions [was] either burnt, looted or severely destroyed in some form" after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, according to the United Nations University International Leadership Institute in Jordan. Iraqi education was further crippled by "de-Baathification," the Coalition Provisional Authority policy that forcibly removed more than 10,000 Baath Party teachers from Iraq.

Huck and Kubasak concluded that Iraqi refugees would have the best chance of educational success in the United States. The couple set up a classroom in their small Damascus apartment, and in 2007, the Iraqi Student Project was born.

Soon refugees were attending 20 hours of college preparatory classes a week, studying for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and working on college essays and applications. Huck and Kubasak sought out U.S. schools that would waive tuition for the Iraqi students, and by 2012, the project had 35 educational partners, nearly a quarter of which were Catholic colleges and universities.

In summer 2012, the escalating violence in Syria forced Huck and Kubasak back to the United States. The final cohort of eight Iraqi students had been accepted into U.S. schools.

In an email exchange, NCR *interviewed Huck and Kubasak to find out what will become of the Iraqi Student Project in light of the continuing turmoil in Syria and Iraq.*

***NCR*: Huck has said that the Iraqi Student Project was partially created out of a sense of responsibility toward Iraqi youth in Syria. Can you explain this further?**
Huck and Kubasak: The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 completed what our country had done in the 1991 Gulf War when the infrastructure of Iraq -- bridges, roads, sewage treatment, power plants -- throughout the country was bombed by the U.S. By the time we visited Iraq in 1999, it was sinking into despair. One incident remains vivid. We were leaving a large hospital in Basra. One of the medical students we had met followed us outside and said to us, "Can you get me a book?" He was pleading. These students had no access to medical journals or current textbooks and were so desperate to be good doctors. From that moment and so many others, we grieved over what had already been inflicted upon the young people of Iraq. ...

What did you do from 2005-2007 in Syria? How did those two years shape your vision of the Iraqi Student Project?
In early 2005, we visited Damascus for the first time, and by August we moved there and began studying Arabic. ? We settled into the life of this ancient city and soon came to love the people, the culture, the musical way Arabic is spoken there, the call to prayer marking the times of day. ...

Tens of thousands of Iraqis were coming into Syria every month as refugees. We came to know some of them, and by late 2006, we were beginning to invent what would become the Iraqi Student Project.

Here we must say what an amazing thing Syrians did in opening their country to at least 1.5 million Iraqis with no sense for how long they would be staying. And in doing this, young Iraqis were admitted without charge to Syria's elementary and high schools. But university studies were open to them only if they could pay a tuition -- out of reach to nearly all the refugees. ...

We asked what our country, having inflicted so much pain and disorder into the lives of these young people, might be able to give them. That wasn't hard to answer. The U.S. has many extraordinary colleges and universities offering a liberal arts education.

So in the summer of 2007, we were in the U.S. where we formed an ISP board and applied for non-for-profit status in New York state, then for 501(c)(3) from the IRS. Meanwhile, by September, we were back in Syria putting our first group together.

The media often speaks of the "lost generation of the Arab world." What are the current options for young Arabs?
In various ways one could say more than one generation has been "lost." Sometimes lost to their country of birth because some chose to flee repressive governments ? sometimes lost because the youth in many of these nations became such a large percentage of the overall population and the education systems were not keeping up. And sometimes lost, as in Iraq, from the succession of war (with Iran in the l980s, then the Gulf War in 1991) and sanctions and more war. The amazing thing is how some had the strength to keep learning, keep seeking, keep hoping. These are the students we were seeking.

How did the project operate from 2007-2012?
From the fall of 2007 until summer of 2012, we worked with five groups, from eight to 24 students each year, selected for their strength in English, resiliency, imagination, curiosity, also the family's zeal for education and their inability to pay for higher education. We had volunteers, mostly first-language English speakers studying Arabic in Damascus, to help us as teachers. So from September to June, students had six days a week of classes -- developing English skills in lecture-listening, academic writing and critical reading. They were

learning what would be needed for a good U.S. university. They prepared also for the test of English required by U.S. colleges, and they wrote application essays to various colleges. Finally, we prepared them to have a good interview for a U.S. student visa. ...

After the Arab Spring ignited conflict in Syria, what did you do?
We lived there for 17 months after the struggle for change turned violent on both sides in the spring of 2011. That was far longer than most Westerners living in Syria, far longer than those of the embassies. We have only sorrow about the violence that has overcome Syria, and the way Syria has become a place for regional and international powers to do battle at such a cost to the Syrian people, and to all of us who owe much to what the old civilizations of the Middle East gave to us. We count ourselves blessed to have lived there.

What happened to the project's students who entered U.S. institutes of higher education?
In all, over those five years, 60 Iraqi students came to U.S. colleges. ? So far, 25 have graduated with 28 still in college. A few others did not succeed. Some of the ISP graduates, now on their own, are in graduate schools. Some have sought asylum in the U.S. or have obtained permission to work for a limited period while they apply for graduate studies. One student who graduated this spring is now working at the Mayo Clinic, another at Cornell Medical College in New York City, another has been active with the movement to pardon Bradley Manning.

This past summer [students] Samah worked in Tunisia and Sarab in northern Iraq. Rand was working with children at a camp in Michigan, Ahmed was with the International Rescue Committee, Alaa was at a hospital in the Twin Cities. Sundus was interning with an architect in California. ...

Have any students returned to Iraq? If so, what are their stories like?
So far, no one has returned to Iraq to live. The sadness here is that ISP was to be one small thing we Americans could do for Iraq as a society and not only for individual Iraqis. Now, six years after we began ISP, Iraq remains a difficult and often dangerous place. But Iraq is more than this, more than the damage done by occupation and strife. For these students, Iraq is a unique place, cradle of civilization, heart of the awakening of poetry and medicine, philosophy and mathematics, physics and music. Iraq is a remarkable, tolerant society that they mourn and hope for. Will they hold onto that? We hope that someday these young people will return to Iraq and be with a generation that rebuilds, restores, renews the cradle of civilization.

If it is possible in the future, would you go back to Syria and restart ISP?
When it is possible, we would hope to live in the wonderful and so hospitable city of Damascus again. But could we do ISP again? Each year, as the schools in Iraq and Syria become less and less able to educate, it becomes harder to do what we were doing with students coming from those schools even four or five years ago. And in the U.S., we found it harder each year to locate colleges willing to offer a tuition waiver. Iraq, for Americans, has been moved to the well-forgotten past.

From 2007-2012, students joining the project had to agree that they would return to Iraq after their U.S. education was complete. How do you feel about this clause now?
Given that these young Iraqis were only 8 years old when the U.S. invaded, and they never knew an Iraq without sanctions, and nearly all they hear from their friends still in Iraq is so grim, that's hard. The intention to return is a requirement for the U.S. student visa. But it's an intention harder and harder to expect. Return to what? Corruption? Unemployment? Sectarian killing? This heritage comes in large part from Iraq's encounter, from 1990 until now, with the American empire. We have no right to dictate to any young Iraqi where they should live. ...

What does ISP do now?
We continue to work by email with a few students in Iraq who wish to apply to the two-year schools, 14 of them

around the world, called United World College. Each of these amazing schools strives for a thoroughly international student body. They offer the International Baccalaureate and, in our experience, an excellent opportunity for a scholarship to a four-year university. This year, four of the students we have been working with are starting at UWC schools in the U.S., Canada, Netherlands and Swaziland.

How can people help the Iraqi Student Project?
There will be students in undergraduate studies for three more years. We have been the most low-budget operation one could imagine, but there are costs and there are occasional emergency needs. ISP is a 501(c)(3), so donations are tax-deductible and are needed.

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