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### **Iraq Presses Ahead With Global Partnerships Despite Challenges**

*By Ian Wilhelm*

On 2.7 acres of empty land along the Shatt al-Arab River in southern Iraq, Mustafa Alshawi has big plans.

The professor from the University of Salford, in Britain, envisions what he says would be Iraq's first science and technology park, intended to generate start-ups run by students and faculty members from the University of Basra. The project, at an expected cost of \$100-million, is expensive, but Mr. Alshawi has already recruited international supporters, including Lyle & Partners, a British business-development company, which is lining up private investors.

Eventually, he says, the park could better prepare Basra's students to work in the local oil and gas industry, which would bolster the war-torn city's economy. "The curriculum at the university needs to be updated and needs to be linked to the rebuilding of the city," he says.

Mr. Alshawi is among dozens of faculty members from Western institutions who are assisting Iraqi universities. Such efforts are small, in many cases involving only a handful of people, and are unlikely to solve the range of problems facing the country's higher-education system. Yet university leaders in Iraq say that after more than 20 years of almost total isolation, they are desperate for the latest ideas in teaching, technology, and university management.

The science park, for example, could help the University of Basra move to the forefront not only by Iraqi standards but by international standards as well, says Salih Ismael Najim, president of the university. And without Mr. Alshawi, it would have remained a pipe dream. "We don't have the expertise to do the work ourselves," says Mr. Najim.

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Western and Iraqi universities have started a variety of partnerships and faculty exchanges with the goals of updating curricula, preserving cultural artifacts and archaeological sites, and developing fields of study that are new to Iraq, like women's studies.

Working in Iraq, of course, poses significant challenges. The threat of violence, political instability, and lack of infrastructure have taken their toll. In June, Stephen Everhart, an associate professor of finance at the American University in Cairo, was killed in a car bombing in Baghdad while working as a subcontractor for the U.S.

Agency for International Development. And DePaul University's College of Law, which had worked in Iraq for nine years to document human-rights abuses and improve legal education, ended its work there in 2011 because of threats to its scholars and Iraqi employees.

American universities working in the more volatile parts of the country say the departure of the U.S. military in December further complicates their activities.

"It's more difficult for U.S. universities to actually visit their Iraqi partners," says Kenneth Holland, dean of Ball State's Rinker Center for International Programs. With funds from the U.S. State Department, Ball State is working with the University of Tikrit and building an English-language center in Baghdad. Previously during visits to Tikrit, which has experienced persistent attacks by militants, Mr. Holland was accompanied by U.S. Army soldiers and traveled in a Chinook helicopter. Now he must hire private-security guards. While his trips to the country aren't frequent, the cost of hiring a security detail—about \$11,000 for each visit—means the university will have less funds to pay for Iraqi faculty members to visit Ball State's campus, he says.

Other parts of Iraq, like Kurdistan in the north, remain relatively safe, and universities in those areas tend to have a larger number of international ties. (One American academic says visiting the Kurdish capital of Irbil "was like going to Pittsburgh.")

#### **Rethinking Approaches**

Given the hazards of working in Iraq, successful partnerships require specific and realistic goals that build lasting relationships between individual scholars, say academics who have been there.

After spending years developing ties between institutions, which didn't have much traction, the U.S. State Department is supporting more-focused collaborations. "It was thought that if we concentrated on specific departmental and college linkages, the relationships there would be closer," says Suzanne L. Bodoïn, a cultural-affairs officer at the embassy. "If we were working with engineering departments, it would be engineers working with engineers."

Despite a shrinking number of embassy staff in Baghdad, the State Department says education remains one of its top priorities in Iraq.

Among a variety of higher-education programs it supports, the department in 2010 started the Iraq University Linkages Program. It provides grants of \$1.5-million to seven American universities to develop ties with Iraqi institutions to modernize course content and teaching methods, develop online education, improve English-language instruction, and establish career centers.

The University of Cincinnati, for example, is working with Salahaddin University to improve the teaching of finance, economics, and English as a second language. Gulbahar H. Beckett, director of Cincinnati's Center for International Education and Research, says that through annual faculty visits to Ohio and Salahaddin's campus in Irbil, along with monthly videoconferencing sessions, the project is helping to move Iraqi professors away from lecture-heavy instruction and rote memorization.

In October, she visited Salahaddin for two days to observe classes. "I was pleasantly surprised they were implementing some of the things we taught them," she says. In one memorable class, she watched a lively student-led discussion on the symbolism of angels and devils in the Koran, the Bible, and other religious texts.

For partnerships to work, she stresses that foreign professors cannot treat their Iraqi colleagues as second-tier academics, especially in light of Iraq's history as the intellectual center of the Middle East. "They think of themselves as equals—and we do, too," she says.

Yet finding faculty peers who are committed to joint efforts can take time, says Thomas Hill, a clinical assistant professor at New York University's Center for Global Affairs, who has worked in Iraq since 2003.

"They're no different than we are. People here at universities as well as people in Iraq at universities sometimes like to sign up for things because there's a nice trip involved, they'll meet some interesting people, which are not illegitimate reasons. But sometimes that's as deep as the commitment goes," he says. "It takes years to figure out the people who are on board because they get some intellectual charge out of engaging with a different system."

#### **Unorthodox Methods**

Mr. Hill is helping the University of Duhok develop a master's degree and research projects in the field of conflict resolution. Last fall, eight professors from Duhok traveled to New York City, where Mr. Hill introduced them to new teaching concepts, occasionally using some unorthodox methods. For example, the professors donned helmets and carabiners to ascend the highest climbing wall in the

city, which Mr. Hill says provides a lesson in the power of experiential learning.

Joutyar M. R. Siddeeq, a lecturer in the University of Duhok's School of Law and Politics, says Mr. Hill has helped him change how he teaches in the classroom. "I became inclined to provide more space for students' participation and discussions and to give more students more roles in the class," he writes in an e-mail.

Other Iraqi scholars, however, have not been as open to new ideas.

"Some of the professors said, 'I generally don't allow my students to speak in class,'" says Matthew L. Hale, an associate professor of political science and public affairs at Seton Hall University who has worked to develop a course on nonprofit management and finance in Iraq. Mr. Hall has found academics willing to try new approaches, but there are those who won't budge from the lecture-style format.

Western professors are quick to say they sympathize with such resistance. As Mr. Hill puts it, what reaction would American faculty members have if an outsider walked into their hallowed halls and said, "Let's tear down your existing curriculum and build it back up."

Any inertia, though, is also attributed to the top-down approach to decision making in Iraq's higher-education system.

"One of the biggest challenges has been that there are still a number of senior administrators and academics at the universities who are of the old school and feel completely hidebound by the ministry and ministerial control," says Brendan McSharry, the British Council's country director in Iraq. The council, the cultural and educational outreach arm of the British government, has managed since 2009 a program that has provided \$4.5-million to 26 European and American institutions, including the University of Salford and NYU, to aid Iraqi higher education.

Ali Al-Adeeb, Iraq's minister of higher education and scientific research, has called for greater autonomy for Iraq's universities and encouraged them to pursue international partners. Last month, during a conference in Washington on building U.S.-Iraqi higher-education ties, he chided university presidents for signing agreements to work with foreign institutions and then failing to do enough to follow through.

Often, though, foreign academics and others find themselves caught up in red tape.

The Civilian Research and Development Foundation, an American nonprofit that is seeking to revitalize science in Iraq, is working with

10 Iraqi universities to develop 21st-century forensic-science capabilities, which would help Iraqi police in their investigations of car bombings and other acts of mass violence. The Iraqi government in general has been supportive of the project, says Cindi Warren Mentz, who oversees programs for the foundation in the Middle East and North Africa. But it's frustrating that each time she wants to take an Iraqi scientist to train at a modern lab in Jordan, she needs approval from the Ministry of Higher Education, a decision she says should be made by a university president or dean. "The Iraqi higher-education system is highly centralized," she says.

Mr. Alshawi, of Salford, has similar complaints.

A professor of management and information technology in construction, he has received substantial support from the University of Basra and local government officials for the science park and the building of a multidisciplinary center on the Basra campus. But a plan to offer a joint degree in project management has been stymied.

"There's the potential for a joint degree, but because of the higher-education ministry's strict rules, it won't allow that," he says.

Mr. Alshawi, who was born in Iraq and graduated from the University of Basra in 1977, hopes he can help modernize his alma mater, but he is realistic about the obstacles—an attitude echoed by many of the foreign academics working in Iraq.

"We are making progress," he says, "but I would say when it comes to a wide scale, it's going to take some time."

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