

April 8, 2010
Op-Ed Contributor

Send In the Professors

By KARIM ALTAI

Harrisonburg, Va.

I SPENT one of the most difficult nights of my childhood in Baghdad worrying that I was failing two of my classes. What kept me awake was the fear of having to tell my mother, whose emphasis on doing well in school reflected generations of faith in learning.

Iraq once boasted one of the most advanced systems of higher education in the Middle East. But that system now lies in shambles. More than 400 professors have been assassinated. Universities have been devastated by bombs, looting and neglect. My sister's office at the University of Baghdad was burned in an attack that forced her to join the thousands of academics who have fled their posts or their country.

Those Iraqi faculty members who remain have only minimal support within the country and are virtually cut off from the wider world. Examples of their isolation are as disheartening as they are numerous. To mention just one discouraging incident: Professors at the University of Tikrit wanted to host a conference to address desertification and drought, but could not figure out whom to invite, or how to invite them.

While studying this situation for the State Department recently, I visited with 200 faculty members and administrators in Iraq, and I saw firsthand how cynical some have become. "You destroyed Iraq — why are you here?" one asked. Another professor looked at me, paused, and, with his hands folded, said, "Occupy us with your knowledge and advances, not with your guns." I immediately understood his hostility — my personal security detail that day included more than 20 armed guards.

To be fair, the United States is carrying out a number of commendable educational initiatives in Iraq. For example, a [youth exchange program](#) enables 50 Iraqi students to come to the United States each year. The new [Fulbright Visiting Scholarship Program for Iraq](#) will allow more than two dozen Iraqi professors to spend time at American universities. And the [Iraqi Virtual Science Library program](#) provides Iraqi faculty members and professionals access to international journals at reduced cost.

But these American exchange programs have allowed only about 200 Iraqi professors to study abroad over the past seven years. Other countries have been far more involved in rebuilding Iraq's higher education system. Qatar has supported the training of more than

300 Iraqi faculty members since 2003, while 450 Iraqi medical practitioners have received training in Britain since 2007.

Clearly, the United States must do more to live up to the [2008 Strategic Framework Agreement](#), which called for Iraq and the United States to “promote and facilitate cooperation and coordination in the field of higher education and scientific research.” Resurrecting Iraq’s damaged system of higher education would help give the country’s long-suffering people a sense of normalcy as well as the tools to build a better future.

A key first step in this effort is to harness members of an Iraqi diaspora that includes Muslims, Christians and Jews. This will not be hard. Recently, when I talked to an Iraqi-Jewish professor who immigrated to the United States more than 50 years ago, he told me, without hesitation, “I volunteer to teach.” He and I are not alone. There are many more Iraqi-Americans who value the high-quality education they received growing up in Iraq and who are eager to help.

The Department of State should also help set up a network to connect and support interested academics in each country. Before long, we would have academics from both countries writing joint proposals and working together to procure financing for their projects.

Just 5 percent of this year’s quick response fund — allocated by Congress to support short-term, high-impact projects in Iraq — could support more than 100 American-Iraqi faculty collaborations. With an investment of less than half a percent of our annual military expenditure in Iraq, this program could reach all of Iraq’s estimated 30,000 faculty members.

Imagine American and Iraqi experts working to uncover documents dating back to the earliest days of civilization. Or a joint medical team solving the mystery of the alarming rise in the incidence of childhood cancer in southern Iraq and finding treatments that save children throughout the world. Imagine too an Iraq that once again provides its youth with opportunities for learning and serves as a regional beacon of scientific, cultural and religious understanding.

Every Iraqi child’s worst worry should be the one I grappled with that night so many years ago. I often think of how, the following morning, emboldened by a breakfast of my favorite cheese and fresh-baked flatbread, I confessed my fear of failing my classes to my mother. “Education is the most important thing in the world,” she said. “Once you realize that, there is nothing you cannot accomplish.”

Karim Altaii, a professor of engineering at James Madison University, was a Franklin fellow with the United States Department of State from 2008 to 2009. He is the president of the Iraqi-American Higher Education Foundation.