

*An Iraqi man grieves near a blood-stained stretcher after transporting the body of a Sunni professor, shot dead on the streets of Basra, to the city's central morgue on April 11, 2006.*

# Iraqis in Exile:

## SAVING A GENERATION OF SCHOLARS

By Caroline Stauffer

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a man in Baghdad began placing a taxicab sign on the roof of his car and left home at a different time each day, always taking a different route to work. Though he dressed in the simple clothes of a day laborer, the man was a dean of dentistry at a local university. He had no fixed schedule and lived in constant fear of being attacked. Today he lives abroad, having completed a two-year academic fellowship sponsored by the Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund.

Left: A former Baghdad University professor smiles in Tensta shopping mall in 2006. His residency permit in Sweden had been granted the week before. Right: A professor gives a lecture to students at the College of Administration and Economy in Baghdad University on March 16, 2009.



Vicious and targeted assaults against scholars remaining in Iraq continue, particularly in the aftermath of Iraq's 2010 parliamentary elections. Iraqis in exile worry about the future of a country that lacks academic leadership, but many scholars abroad feel lucky even to be alive. The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund, which has helped threatened scholars from around the world continue their work in safety since 2002, seeks to mitigate the damage, drawing on the historical experience of the New York-based Institute of International Education (IIE), founded in 1919.

Henry G. Jarecki, chairman of IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund, received a simple letter from Iraq's Minister of Higher Education Abid Al-Ajeeli in 2007: "Our scholars are being killed," he wrote. "Please save them." In response, IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund launched a separate Iraq initiative, supported by organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the U.S. State Department. Nearly 200 Iraqi scholars have been placed on two-year academic fellowships, and half of the total requests for assistance submitted to IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund have come from Iraqis.

The ongoing persecution of academics is an attempt to, "get rid of the intelligentsia," Jarecki said. "Scholars are more secular in their interests and open to new ideas. They are persecuted by various groups."

According to BRussels Tribunal, a group that campaigned against the U.S. invasion, there were at least 300 documented cases of scholar assassinations in Iraq between 2003 and 2007. Reports from inside the country are far higher.

"Various Iraqi study centers gave shocking figures on this tragedy by listing more than 1,500 university professors and lecturers who were assassinated between 2005 and 2007," said Ghaleb A. Tawfeeq al Wiswasee, an Iraqi journalist currently living in Amman.

Al Wiswasee, editor-in-chief of *Near East Media*, said groups such as the Moqtada al Sadr militia, Hizbollah brigades, and other smaller gangs and sectarian militias "took advantage of the chaotic lawlessness in those years." He estimates that hundreds of scholars have fled to Syria and Jordan, where they remain.

IIE'S Iraq Scholar Rescue Project prioritizes assistance for the senior, most threatened scholars who still reside in Iraq or have fled in recent years, and works with partner universities to provide logistical assistance and stipends to support their families. Eighty percent of the fellows reside in neighboring Jordan, while others are in Syria, the United States, Egypt, Morocco, and Bahrain.

"We like to leave scholars in their part of the world," said IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund Executive Director Jim Miller. "They feel more comfortable and stay in touch with former students."

Al Wiswasee said many Iraqi professors, lecturers, and doctors have managed to get jobs in Jordan and Syria because of the strong reputation of Iraqi professionals. "They have been mixed and merged with the society, where they are accepted and respected," he said.

IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund's Iraqi scholars represent all of Iraq's ethnicities and religions, and 20 percent are women. Seventy percent are scholars of engineering, science, or medicine. Though he anticipated receiving more applications from political scientists, Jarecki believes these percentages reflect the composition of Iraq's professorate under Saddam Hussein. Most of the scholars in Jordan have temporary resident status sponsored by universities, although a handful have United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) status.

Besides sponsoring fellowships, IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund also holds academic trainings for the scholars. Columbia University Lecturer in Sociology Christopher Weiss traveled to Amman in January for one such training session at the Columbia University Middle East Research Center. He gave a presentation on the structure of higher education systems and arranged focus groups so the scholars could discuss rebuilding Iraq's higher education system.

"It was hard for us not to feel aware that these scholars were in exile now—at least to some degree because of the American-led war and occupation," Weiss said. "We never felt any animosity or ill will from the scholars—none. But we did think a lot



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**—GHALEB A. TAWFEEQ AL WISWASEE**

about how a couple of younger American scholars would appear to this audience."

Funding and training, however, don't eliminate the struggle of leaving home and adapting to life in exile. Many scholars were greatly constrained by decades of war and state-imposed travel restrictions and struggle with post-traumatic stress and physical ailments. "Settling into their academic responsibilities is a heavy burden, but one which we have seen again and again handled with strength and determination to create opportunities for their families and themselves as well as for the future of Iraq," Miller said.

Many nonacademics have also fled the violence; by the end of 2009, 300,000 Iraqis had registered with the UNHCR, primarily in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. But the absence of intellectual leadership is sorely noticed inside Iraq. According to Al Wiswasee, the doctors now working in

Baghdad's hospitals are recent graduates with little work experience, and the city's intellectuals and professors are either dead or teaching in Jordanian and Syrian universities. "These two sectors, education and medical care, are the pillars of developing any society," he said. "If you lose both of them, then there is no chance of advancement and development, at least for another decade."

IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund aims to stop this development paralysis by helping its scholars maintain links with faculty and students at home and encouraging an eventual return. To date, three scholars have returned and two have been placed on fellowships in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq, but another 22 have accepted opportunities to stay abroad after completing their fellowships.

Some professors on fellowship advise their PhD and master's students in Iraq from abroad.

The IIE's Iraq Scholar Rescue Project also started an E-lecture program in 2008, filming lectures by Iraqi professors from safe locations outside the country that are shown at universities inside Iraq.

But considering that the scholars have received death threats, were kidnapped, or witnessed the murders of family members, facing the realities of their homeland can just be too traumatic. "Some are engaged in Iraq," Jarecki said. "Others have had to turn their backs."

According to Miller, scholars in Iraq were targeted in the weeks before and after the March voting in Baghdad, including two scholars killed, two wounded, and a medical professor who was stabbed to death in his house. Scholars reportedly voted from Jordan, Syria, the U.S., and the UK.

Al Wiswasee does not believe the return of Iraq's intellectuals and doctors is likely in the foreseeable future. "Very few of them have any remorse for leaving the country or think of going back unless things change for the better and unless they receive real and serious assurances from the new government that their lives and rights will be seriously protected," he said.

Though the UNHCR is prepared to support the return to Iraq of up to 5,000 refugees from Jordan in 2010, a survey conducted in 2009 showed that the majority of refugees there had no immediate plans to return home. In a February report, the agency anticipated 700 additional Iraqis registering with the UNHCR in each month of 2010 in Jordan alone.

Even when the violence does relent in Iraq some day, IIE knows from experience that academics around the world will face persecution for as long as humanity engages in despotism and war. Chairman Jarecki is keenly aware of this unrelenting need for assistance, having fled Nazi Germany as a child.

IIE recently reviewed its effort to rescue Spanish scholars in 1939. "We realized the situation could have been Iraq today," said Daniela Kaisth, IIE vice president for strategic development and co-author of the book *Scholar Rescue in the Modern World*. "It's happened before, and it will happen again."

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