On September 3, 2014, the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies (BCARS) hosted a unique workshop featuring eight Iraqi Fulbright visiting scholars, all graduates of various Iraqi institutions of higher education. These eight Fulbright Scholars spent the summer in Boston and were based at Salem State University. The scholars were selected to participate in the Fulbright program at Salem State from a pool of over 300 candidates across Iraq. The scholars specialize in various disciplines and sub-fields of English language training, including pedagogy, grammar, and applied linguistics at universities throughout Iraq. They represent several regions and universities, including the University of Baghdad, University of Diyala, University of Kufa, and Sulaymaniya University in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The aim of the BCARS-hosted workshop was three-fold:

1. To facilitate a discussion with academics in the Boston area on the state of higher education in Iraq’s conflict zones;
2. To better understand critical challenges facing Iraqi scholars and academics working inside the country; and
3. To elucidate the professional and personal needs of Iraqi academics working at various institutions of higher education inside Iraq, particularly following the post-2003 “brain drain.”

While the Iraqi scholars reflected positively on the success of exchange and scholarship programs, such as Fulbright in the United States, Erasmus in the E.U., and Chevening in the U.K., they all highlighted critical challenges to the state of higher education in Iraq, particularly post-2003. First, the types of constraints that shape the level of access and delivery of higher education vary between Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In the case of the former, scholars underscored the security situation as a decisive factor in determining university enrollment and educator access to institutions of higher education. Physical safety has posed a big hurdle in accessing university classrooms and campuses, which has impeded education delivery. In fact, a professor from a university outside of Baghdad was advised by students not to carry a briefcase to work because that made her an identifiable target for terrorist groups targeting academics and professors, specifically. Others pointed to the prohibition of mobile devices (including cell phones and laptop computers) from university campuses across the country as such devices can be used to remotely activate and detonate bombs targeting students and faculty members; this prohibition clearly disrupts the delivery of information in an increasingly technologically dependent learning environment.

Moreover, although the security dimension was less of an issue for students and faculty in the Kurdistan Region, corruption and nepotism pose the biggest challenges to the state of higher education on both the state and the sub-state level. These issues extended to the selections of candidates to masters and doctoral programs, determined funding distribution, employment opportunities, and academic appointments. Furthermore, scholars from the Kurdistan Region emphasized issues regarding mandatory political party affiliations as decisive factors in graduate school admissions and faculty and academic appointments throughout universities in the Kurdistan region. On a regional level, however, there appears to be more investment in higher education capacity building through the formation of new universities and the creation of new departments and expansion of existing schools and faculties.

Although the challenges encountered varied across cities and most notably between Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, faculty and students alike experienced similar constraints in the circumstances that have affected higher education across the country. The scholars across Iraq point to the continued dearth of academics from the country stemming from the 1991 and the post-2003 “brain drain” that resulted in the targeting and subsequent flight of academics and technocrats from the country. This “brain drain” has affected the ratio of students to professors as the ever-growing levels of student enrollment far surpass the availability of professors, especially where the enrollment in English language programs specifically is increasing faster than faculty availability. Many English professors echo similar concerns regarding limited classroom space, increase in weekly lecturing hours to accommodate a larger student body (in one case, from eight hours per week to over thirty hours), limited faculty availability, and an exponential increase in administrative and academic duties associated with the rise in student enrollment. On a national level, the faculty members shared similar sentiments regarding the lack of overall funding and investment in higher education, including investment in new research technologies and digital access to domestic and international research resources. Likewise, the scholars noted limitations in the availability and
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