
A ROADMAP FOR REBUILDING HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRAQ

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As the battle for Mosul nears an end, Iraqis anticipate the defeat of Daesh (also known as Islamic State) and an end to the brutality that has gripped the country for the past two years. Much of the territory held by the group has been liberated in recent months, and conversations have already begun about what a post-Daesh Iraq will look like. As residents who fled liberated areas continue to trickle back, we can see the extent of the damage and the magnitude of the effort required for rebuilding.

Large proportions of the academics and students who have been in exile during the last two years will face major problems in the rehabilitation of their looted homes if they are still intact. On the other hand, the academics and students who have stayed at Mosul need to forget the dark months lived under the rule of Daesh. Both will be in need of social and psychological care, said Muzaham Qasim al-Khayat, president of Ninewah University.

The main goal, he added, is to restore the university to a better level than it was before Daesh. (The idea of building back better in post [] Iraq is discussed in an article by Sultan Barakat and Sansom Miller of the Brookings Doha Center.)

As part of the work of my organization, IREX, on the University Linkages Program (funded by the U.S. embassy in Baghdad), we recently gathered academic leaders from across the country to discuss their priorities for higher education, including post-Daesh recovery. Coupled with our ongoing discussions with individual universities, a picture began to emerge of the needs of individual institutions. Not surprisingly, discussions with campus leaders from Ramadi and Mosul reflect a myriad of concerns about their communities and the resources available for rebuilding.

Over the past two years, universities managed to keep most classes open by creatively drawing on available resources [] borrowing halls, labs and facilities from neighboring universities at night and on weekends, renting space in hotels for offices and offering some instruction online. Now, even as many universities in recently liberated areas have resumed classes on their home campus, large numbers of students and faculty members remain scattered across Iraq as refugees. The process of closing down improvised campuses and shifting back to their home communities, many of which are partially rubble and lack basic services, is not an easy one.

Those returning home face demolished buildings, classrooms and infrastructure. Labs, textbooks and equipment were destroyed, and chemicals and other materials were looted by Daesh. Most student academic records [] almost entirely in hard copy on campuses [] destroyed in shelling or deliberately burned by Daesh, so very limited student records remain.

Many faculty members are still afraid to return to their home communities. They remember the years when they were directly targeted and know that nearly 500 Iraqi academics were killed between 2003 and 2012. They are keenly aware that Daesh targeted academics with ties to the United States and other Western countries. And ongoing attacks by remaining cells, such as the recent suicide bombing in Fallujah, exacerbate fears of returning. The absence of refugee faculty members leaves a shortage of qualified instructors.

While infrastructure projects to restore electricity, water and basic services have begun in some areas, there is a paramount need to support communities in rebuilding and healing.

The most immediate tangible needs of universities tasked with rebuilding include textbooks and access to academic libraries, since scores of books were burned under Daesh. Essential classroom equipment and computers, along with field-specific equipment such as microscopes for medical labs, are also vital. And replacement university vehicles for students and staff to commute to campus were stolen so will need replacing.

While some universities in liberated or soon-to-be liberated areas have good connections with the international community, others lack substantive relationships that could assist rebuilding. Several of the university leaders I spoke with described the lack of international response so far as disheartening, but they remain hopeful that the global academic community will support their monumental task.

Given the key role of higher education in community-building and stabilization, there is a pressing need to mobilize the global academic community's support for Iraqi institutions in recovery and transition. Iraqi academics I have spoken with are clearly determined not only to reconstruct buildings and replace equipment, but to improve the quality of their institutions and campus services [] genuinely build back better. U.S. higher education institutions and individuals can support this work by offering the following:

Online blended learning models in which U.S. faculty members co-teach select courses with a local faculty member facilitating on the ground. This is especially important where the absence of faculty members due to displacement has created an even greater shortage of qualified instructors;

Mirror labs or remote experimentation labs as more consistent Internet access is restored;

Access for students to field-specific online courses where resources or lack of faculty members prevent Iraqi universities from offering them;

In the midst of vast challenges, the current situation for Iraqi universities liberated from Daesh control presents an important opportunity [] opportunity to strategically rebuild academic institutions and programs to a higher quality than pre-Daesh, and in doing so wield a powerful weapon in preventing future extremism in areas ravaged by extremist ideology.

Universities or individuals interested in receiving updates and information on opportunities to support Iraqi institutions in recovery are invited to register at this link. IREX will provide updates and share information with U.S. universities and faculty members interested in receiving it.

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