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CONNECTING SYRIAN & IRAQI SCHOLARS TO FINNISH UNIVERSITIES

The Syrian and Iraqi higher education sectors and the lives of their researchers and students have been upended due to conflict and war. In oppressive regimes, the academic pursuit of knowledge is commonly seen as a threat. These at-risk individuals often have a lot to contribute to human intellectual advancement. In Finland, among much discussion on the issue of refugees, a novel partnership is connecting some of these individuals to higher education institutions that can host them.

Syria, site of the worst humanitarian crisis of the 21st century, has suffered a higher education emergency on a scale the world has never seen before (see page 9). According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 26% of Syrian young people were participating in tertiary education on the eve of the conflict.¹ Along with these 350,000 students, approximately 8000 faculty were teaching and conducting research at Syria's nearly 25 higher education institutions.² The devastation of this once-strong higher education system has been nothing short of dramatic, with many university facilities destroyed. According to estimates from the Institute of International Education (IIE), well over 100,000 university students and as many as 2000 university professionals are living amongst the refugee population, with their studies and academic careers interrupted indefinitely.

The situation in Iraq is no less dire, with the higher education system seemingly paralysed by war and instability. As of 2014, nearly 500 Iraqi academics had been threatened, kidnapped or assassinated, according to records kept by the Brussels Tribunal.³ The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has captured and shut down three of the country's largest universities – in Mosul, Tikrit, and Anbar. While these universities have

now reopened in relatively safer locations, the lives and work of their professors and students have been truncated. Meanwhile, militias continue to play a destructive role for universities.

THINKING OF THE FUTURE

In Iraq and Syria, scientific research is largely on hold, with physical destruction commonplace and university classrooms severely depleted due to the displacement of students and professors. Rebel groups, militants, and repressive regime forces alike target the countries' university professionals, who are symbols of societal progress and free thought. Under these circumstances,

Without researchers, there is no intellectual progress

these thought leaders within their communities are effectively silenced. When professors and researchers are dismissed, chased from their homes, arrested, or even killed, entire national academies are put at risk. Without researchers, there is no intellectual progress. Without professors to teach, youth lose their access to education. Without an educated gener-

ation of future leaders, the rebuilding of Syria and Iraq will be impossible.

Quite a few European governments now recognise the importance of supporting higher education in emergencies, including in Syria and Iraq. Although these governments – and their higher education institutions – want to help, they often lack the capacity or expertise to identify qualified academics in need, to connect them to university positions, or to create the necessary support structures on their countries' campuses to ensure scholars' successful academic integration. Additionally, universities often lack the available funding to create *ad hoc* visiting positions. To address these challenges, one innovative model for response has come out of a new trans-Atlantic partnership between the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO), a Finnish government agency promoting internationalisation especially in the field of education, and the IIE, a USA-based non-profit that advances international education and access to education worldwide.

DESTINATION: FINLAND

In Finland, as in many countries in Europe, the number of asylum seekers began to drastically increase after the summer of 2015. In 2014, the total

number of asylum seekers was around 3500; in 2015, the total number was ten times higher – approximately 35,000. While this figure remains modest relative to many European countries, it is nonetheless high when compared to the current number of foreigners who permanently reside in Finland (220,000) and the country's overall population of 5.4 million.⁴

As the public debate in Finland has very much concentrated on the costs of integrating the fairly high number of refugees into Finnish society and problems related to it, CIMO felt it was of utmost importance to shed light on the other aspects of this reality. Aware of the high number of students and academics who have been forced to leave their homes in Syria, Iraq and their neighbouring countries, CIMO began to explore possible ways to support the academic community in the region. In January 2016, it entered into a three-year partnership with IIE's Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF) programme, with this goal in mind.

IIE-SRF selects for fellowship support outstanding professors and researchers who face threats to their lives and careers and arranges visiting academic positions outside their home countries. Fellowship grants are matched by hosting institutions that provide safe haven to the scholars, enabling them to share their knowledge with students, colleagues, and the host community. Since its founding, IIE-SRF has awarded fellowships to more than 300 scholars from Iraq and over 80 from Syria.

A MULTI-WAY PARTNERSHIP

This new joint initiative between IIE-SRF and CIMO will provide support

to up to five early-career academics from Syria and Iraq to pursue their work in Finland. CIMO will promote the opportunity of hosting the threatened scholars among Finnish higher education institutions, and CIMO scholarships will be available as matching funding for the IIE-SRF fellowship. Institutions will gain access to qualified and pre-screened candidates from IIE-SRF, which will also provide a support structure for placing the scholarship holders at universities and supporting their stay. At the same time, CIMO will connect IIE-SRF with a new network of dedicated higher education institution partners, allowing for more and better partnering options.

It is hoped that many of the participating professors and researchers supported will one day be able to return to Syria and Iraq to help rebuild their respective societies. In the meantime, scholars are not the only ones benefiting from this partnership. Integrating foreign academics into the higher education community in Finland – and European countries more

It is a win-win situation for both sides

generally – is mutually beneficial for both the scholars and the hosting community. Scholars contribute to the capacity-building of higher education in Finland and build long-lasting networks within the higher education community. It is a win-win situation for both sides, as even those who cannot return home in the short term will play an important role in leading their

communities in exile and will continue to contribute specialised knowledge that is relevant globally. Furthermore, the partnership will offer opportunities for Finnish higher education institutions to become future members of global IIE and IIE-SRF networks.

We believe that this partnership offers an innovative model for European governments eager to support academics swept up in conflict. The partnership harnesses the strengths of governments and non-profits to the benefit of threatened scholars and, ultimately, entire national academes.

— MAIJA AIRAS & JAMES KING

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3. Brussels Tribunal. (2014, March 23). List of Killed, Threatened or Kidnapped Iraqi Academics. Retrieved February 8, 2016 from www.brussellstribunal.org/bt-old/article_view5e3e.html?ID=502#.Vrj8kvkrKUm

4. Finland in Figures, Statistics Finland from www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html#foreigners; Statistics on Asylum and Refugees, The Finnish Immigration Service from www.migri.fi/about_us/statistics/statistics_on_asylum_and_refugees