

# R E A W A

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This article is the first in a two-part series about U.S. partnerships with Iraq and Afghanistan to help revitalize higher education in those nations after U.S. military presence.*

## IN 2010

Ball State University educator Kenneth Holland gave a talk to Iraqi educators and students on the importance of career centers, one focus of an educational partnership between U.S. and Iraqi universities in Baghdad. As he explained how such centers work in the United States, with, for example, companies coming on campus to interview students for jobs, a student raised her hand.

“She explained that in Iraq there is no private sector and you get your job through your tribal affiliation or your parent,” says Holland, who is director of Ball State’s Center for International Development. “While this wasn’t entirely surprising to me, it showed just how different the process and standard procedures may be for universities in other nations to serve their students.”

The Iraqi student’s comment was a window into the chasm separating standard procedures at U.S. higher education institutions from the standards at Iraq institutions as the two worked to set up higher education cooperative partnerships intended to benefit both parties.

“Universities in Iraq don’t have career centers, and we played a major role in introducing that to them,” says Holland. “There also was no concept of student services. Most people worked for the government, and they were trained to work for government institutions. Most were told what they would major in and what their job would be and where. Everything was prescribed for the students.”

**Higher education in Iraq suffered in the aftermath of U.S. military action, now U.S. colleges and universities are building partnerships to help rebuild higher education opportunities for Iraqis.**



# KENNING

## Higher Education in Iraq

By David Tobenkin





“That has completely changed,” Holland says. “At universities, students have more choice in what they major in.”

Iraq has suffered from decades of isolation and war, capped by the U.S.-led invasions and control in 2003. Higher education was among the major casualties in the conflict, with personnel, infrastructure, and budgets depleted.

But partnerships between U.S. higher education institutions and organizations and their counterparts in Iraq formed in the last decade have proven a lifeline of support for their beleaguered academies.

The partnerships tend to be workshops or exchange programs between the United States and administrators, academics, and students from Iraq, many heavily subsidized by U.S. government organizations. Some

aspects of the exchange programs tend to be one-way, with students and professors from Iraq tending to visit the United States far more than visits in the other direction. U.S. academics have also been heavily involved in staffing and supporting some of the new higher education institutions that have been created in recent years.

In addition, scholarships to educate graduate students abroad funded by Iraqi government organizations are ramping up some exchanges.

### **Challenges Create Opportunities**

If the challenges for partnerships between institutions in the United States and Iraq are greater than in partnerships involving more traditional exchange partners, there are arguably greater opportunities, too.

“In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq [in the north], there are 13 public and 10 private universities, and many are very new and have developed in the past five years,” says Michelle Grajek, director for political and diplomatic affairs at the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), who helps administer scholarships from the KRG’s Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to students studying abroad. “U.S. universities really want to get involved now. It’s a fantastic opportunity to build a relationship from the ground up, which can be easier.”

With the withdrawal of United States troops from Iraq beginning in 2009 and ending in 2011, and with political turmoil and violence continuing to roil the

country, the question remains as to whether seeds planted by exchanges will blossom into long-lasting partnerships and, significantly, whether U.S. government bodies will continue to fund them.

### **The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of Higher Education in Iraq**

Baghdad was once the capital of the Arab world and a great center of Arab learning. Starting in 1968, when Baath party rule began, the fate of higher education instruction became a mixed bag. While many institutions had surprisingly strong offerings, by regional standards, they were stifled by isolation, central planning and bureaucracy, and intervention that many related to Saddam Hussein’s brutal rule and by the regime’s socialist policies. “Iraq had a history of top-level scholarship that is comparable to those in Egypt and Lebanon in the Middle East, with many thousands of Ph.D. holders,” says Jim Miller, executive director of the Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education (IIE), a nongovernmental organization fostering international educational development.

One of the more dynamic programs linking Iraqi institutions with those in the U.S. schools has been the University Linkages Program, a \$10 million project funded by the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Since 2010 the program has paired seven U.S. higher education institutions with seven Iraqi institutions: Basrah University with Oklahoma State University; Salahaddin University with the University of Cincinnati; Tikrit University with Ball State University; Kufa University with the University of Kentucky; Baghdad University with Georgia State University; the University of Dohuk with Michigan State University; and the University of Technology with the University of Missouri at Columbia. The program is slated to end by 2014.

Generally, the activities have included curriculum development, accreditation, capacity building, exchanges of faculty, teaching best practices, and further specialization in certain subjects of interest, such as engineering, English as a second language, and pedagogy.

The University of Kentucky, for example, has been assisting Kufa University by developing curriculum, improving pedagogy, supporting quality assurance initiatives, facilitating the use of distance learning technologies, developing career services, and training faculty members from three departments: English, engineering, and business.

Isolated from the mainstream of academia, accreditation remains a large part of the goals for many Iraqi institutions, including Kufa University. The

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chairperson of the University of Kentucky's Civil Engineering Department, George Blandford, has worked with Kufa's College of Engineering to help it try to meet the ABET science and engineering accreditation standard.

"The Iraqi institutions have made big strides toward accreditation, particularly Kufa," says Blandford. "Myself and a colleague have had video conferencing to show what is required. At Kufa, they will probably go first with a Middle Eastern accreditation. The engineering department at Kufa is close to being ABET accredited, but the problem is that ABET won't go there until there is a clean bill of health regarding safety. Areas of the Kurdish region [in the north] are still not stable enough for a visit."

Blandford's efforts at Kufa also included efforts to provide for more hands-on work for engineering students.

"In the past at Kufa, the seniors did a senior thesis, but they now have the option to do a capstone graduation project instead, which is a requirement of ABET and was based on a similar project offering by the University of Kentucky," says Blandford. "The capstone project is integrating the material of the course into a design project executed by a group. The Iraqi students were not very familiar with group work and initially did not have good communication skills, especially for oral presentations, so it was a

good learning experience. For those going through the capstone program, we are helping to get them jobs with foreign companies relocating in Iraq."

Blandford's Kufa counterpart confirmed the value of the program to Kufa and its students. "The main difference between the engineering education systems in Iraqi and American universities is the content delivery, rather than the contents themselves," says Ali Naji Attiyah, department head of the civil engineering department, of the College of Engineering at the University of Kufa. "The topics in engineering courses is almost the same in both systems, but our college is still using the traditional methods of teaching. The use of student-based learning methods and use of new technology in in-class and out-of-class education are new issues that we have tried to use in our college because of ULP."

Blandford says one surprise was the strong presence of women in the Kufa engineering program. "There were quite a few women in the University of Kufa's civil engineering program—35 to 40 percent, which is much better than at [University of] Kentucky, where it is 20 percent women," Blandford says. "That surprised me. With Third World countries, there is more importance placed on technical things, medical first, engineering number two. Very bright women go into it. There are also some barriers: women are not looked upon favorably at a construction site."

Ali Naji Attiyah, department head of the civil engineering department, of the College of Engineering at the University of Kufa in Iraq, visits his partner institution, the University of Kentucky.



Gayle Nelson, second from left, from Georgia State University with University of Baghdad colleagues at the TESOL Arabia Conference, March 14, 2013, Dubai, UAE. In picture from left: Sabah S. Mustafa, Gayle Nelson, Iman Abdulatif, Rasha Azeez, Sabah Atallah Ali, May Kadhim, and Nidham Sheet Hameed.

## Intercultural Understanding Crucial for Building Partnerships

Subtle cultural factors can impact partnerships, notes Nancy Johnson, a University of Kentucky associate professor of management who participated in the university's exchange with Kufa.

"We worked on pedagogy, such as active learning techniques," Johnson says. "We also exposed them to business concepts that we routinely teach and that they have not had under socialism, such as consumer behavior, services marketing, negotiation, analytics, and lean manufacturing," Johnson says. "We initially met with some resistance to these topics, but exposure created recognition that these were important concepts to teach to students. Because of restrictions by the Ministry of Higher Education, they couldn't easily add a whole course on consumer behavior but they could add it as a part of a marketing course."

"I think we did have an impact," Johnson says. "They actually did go to the Ministry of Higher Education to ask for modifications to allow the addition of the modules to their courses. I believe they were successful in getting approval to add some of them. At the end of it, I think that they better understood how the American system worked. They also changed how students are assessed. Before, they used to just test at the end of the semester. Now they have added small exams, cases, and homework. I think it was really beneficial to our faculty as well. Meeting their Iraqi counterparts opened up another part of the world to them."

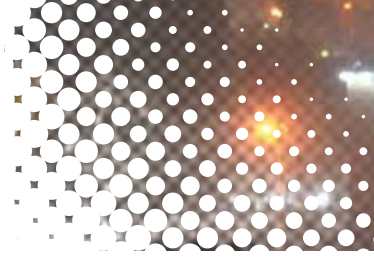
Establishing relationships can be a challenge, says Gayle Nelson, a professor of applied linguistics at Georgia State University who successfully applied for her university's participation in the ULP program,

in which it ultimately partnered with University of Baghdad. "I knew that there were negotiations going on in our country and in Iraq, so I e-mailed the director of [Academy of Education Development (AED), now FHI 360] at the time and talked about my experience with the Middle East, where I've worked a long time and lived. It was hard to get administrative buy-in here. They were concerned about faculty travelling to Iraq due to security issues." Such concern continues. "A team of 10 GSU faculty were scheduled to conduct training in Irbil during summer 2013, but this portion of the program was canceled due to the administration's concerns for our safety," Nelson says.

Nor was all smooth sailing once Nelson arrived in Baghdad. "We were there for four days to find out what the country needed and to negotiate," Nelson says. "We met all the department chairs and representatives of the colleges we'd work with and negotiated the best way to proceed. Those were not easy meetings. It took a while to understand their reality, such as how little control they have over what they teach. The Ministry of Higher Education controls that. Even to introduce American literature, all the changes have to be approved. Teachers don't have as much leeway—you can train teachers but they can't necessarily use all the methods or materials that you give them."

The benefits to American universities are manyfold. "One interest of the U.S. universities is adding diversity to the campus," says Holland. "Many of those Iraqis involved in exchanges are professors and students who come to Ball State and our students get to interact with them. This increases the international diversification on campus and also helps with research, with collaborations between faculty leading





to joint research and presentations that can be long-lasting and beneficial to both parties.”

## A Host of Partnerships

For a young Iraqi university, partnerships with U.S. institutions are a quick way to gain critical support and increase credibility.

“We are keen on developing international institutional partnerships to support these programs and we are looking to grow and add more programs as we mature,” says Kyle Long, a lecturer and administrator at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS). “We have a partnership with the University of Colorado, Boulder to design and implement our engineering program. We’ve had this relationship with them since late 2010 or early 2011. David Clough, a professor of chemical and biological engineering at Boulder comes onto the AUIS campus two or three times a year to help with aspects of the program. He designed the curriculum for the general engineering program and vetted the faculty. We now have 60 or so students enrolled in a four-year undergraduate program that draws students from all over Iraq.”

“His role has been as architect of the curriculum and also, in the interim before we had faculty, he served as a symbolic figurehead to the student body and others that we were taking the establishment of this program seriously by bringing in an individual with excellent credentials to develop our curriculum,” Long says. “We reimburse him for travel and the time he spends on campus. Any other work he does is pro bono. The partnership is also at an institutional level with Boulder, as the vice chancellor for research there, Stein Sture, is one of our trustees and is supportive of Dave taking his time to do this.”

And that is far from the only relationship AUIS has.

Long says that AUIS also has established a partnership with the University of California, Los Angeles to establish a center for expertise in teaching and learning at AUIS. “They will send someone out to do pro bono trainings of secondary school teachers and to participate in an English language training institute,” Long says. “My hope is that we have a center up and running by mid-spring 2014. The idea is that this resource would be not only for our own faculty, but participants would also come from throughout Iraq for exposure to best practices and to learn how they do or don’t apply here. Our own AUIS faculty also need resources on how Iraqi students learn. This will also provide much-needed professional development opportunities for secondary student teachers in the Kurdish area and, ideally, wider Iraq. We will have

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UCLA come out to do trainings of trainers. Our faculty would be facilitators of workshops for secondary school teaching. Graduates would receive a certificate from AUIS and UCLA. The length of the program would vary. We would work with the principals of high schools and solicit from them what their needs are and build the program around their needs. There is no equivalent resource providing professional development opportunities for teachers in the Kurdish area of Iraq. These would be provided for free to institutions and would be funded by a \$500,000 to \$750,000 grant that we are pursuing.”



Partnerships are also formed by academic specialties. “Every year for the past four years in April, a botanist from Old Dominion University, Lytton Musselman, has come out and taught classes on the flora and fauna of Iraq, which is one of his areas of expertise,” says Long.

It all adds up to critical support for a young university, Long says. “We need these partnerships as a young university—we need the support and expertise of more established institutions,” Long says. “A university like ours wouldn’t get access for a year or more to some scholars who are in high demand, but we can get access to them for shorter periods. That is access to expertise that we wouldn’t otherwise get. We also need more bodies because we are short-staffed, as we are a young university without a lot of financial resources, so we are leveraging the resources of institutions

Robert Jones, president of SUNY-Albany, and Athanasios Moulakis, president emeritus of the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), at the signing ceremony between the two universities.



A December 2010 meeting to discuss higher education reform in the Kurdistan regional government in Iraq. The participants, from left to right are: Shahla Al Kli, a senior adviser to the Kurdistan Parliament; Gary Gaffield, then Director of the University Linkages Program for AED and now assistant provost for international partnerships at the University of Kentucky; Sandra Davis, former vice president and director of the Center for Academic Partnerships, AED; and Kamal Kirkuki, speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament.



The launching conference for the University Linkages Program held in Baghdad in June 2010; pictured from left to right are: Sandra Davis, vice president and Director of the Center for Academic Partnerships, AED; Ali Salah, President, Tikrit University (Tikrit was partnered with Ball State University in the ULP program); Kenneth Holland, dean of the Rinker Center for International Programs, Ball State University; Dlawer Abdulazeez Aladeen, minister of higher education and scientific research; Christopher R. Hill, U.S. ambassador to Iraq; and Gary Gaffield, director of the Iraq University Linkages Program, AED, who is now assistant provost for international partnerships at the University of Kentucky.

that want to help. We couldn't have put together the engineering program without Colorado. UCLA is providing invaluable training and expertise. It has been fashionable to trot out these types of partnerships, without a lot of substance to them, but I think these partnerships actually have some teeth to them."

In some cases partnerships have resulted from the long tradition of outstanding foreign academics attending U.S. institutions or teaching there. "The relationship with Boulder developed because our president was at one point in his career a professor of humanities at Boulder involved in a project to teach humanities to engineering students," Long says. "While he was there, he developed a personal relationship with Dr. Clough."

In tallying up the successes of programs like the ULP, the importance of focus becomes important, say

Gary Gaffield, assistant provost for international partnerships at the University of Kentucky and the former project director of the ULP program for FHI 360.

"Having clearly defined goals is particularly important in the Iraqi context, we have found," Gaffield says. "Without them, you can spend enormous amounts of energy and be disappointed with the results. We found, for example, that the Iraqis had priorities of their own that were different from those of the Linkages Program. Many were interested in getting advanced degrees and working with Americans to co-author peer-reviewed articles, whereas the Linkages Program was more focused on capacity-building projects that would develop the university as a whole, such as career centers."

## Partnerships Set the Stage for Greater Collaboration

Some ULP programs have already blossomed into more extensive relationships.

Recently, the University of Missouri at Columbia, which participates in a ULP program with the University of Technology, Baghdad, Iraq, signed an MOU with the Ministry of Higher Education, says Vlad Likholev, director of International Partnerships & Initiatives at the University of Missouri College of Engineering. The MOU includes 12 Iraqi universities encouraged to



participate in collaborative academic and training programs with the University of Missouri. The programs of mutual interest include dual degree (“twinning”) undergraduate programs, graduate study, and short-term professional development, research and training visits.

The idea of establishing a consortium of Missouri–U.S. universities interested in exploring opportunities for academic and research collaboration with Iraqi partners is being considered, Likholetov says. “The Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education intends to expand the scope of collaborative activities to include a wider range of disciplines (beyond science and engineering), as well as other forms of educational and cultural exchange (sports, art, etc.) and is interested in new, innovative ideas for joint projects or activities,” Likholetov says.

## Security Issues

Merely safeguarding academics from harm is an ongoing challenge in Iraq.

At the peak of the violence, in 2006 and 2007, hundreds of scholars, administrators, and students were being killed each year, IIE’s Miller says.

IIE’s Scholar Rescue Fund, through its Iraq Scholar Rescue Project (ISRP), has been involved in rescuing Iraqi higher education scholars and repatriating them to locations of relative security, with funding

for one year plus the opportunity for renewal for another year.

“In 2007–08, many university campuses suffered from a lack of equipment and basic resources like electricity and we asked ourselves how, given this conflict situation, we could keep learning alive,” says Miller. “We developed a program where we filmed lectures by scholars outside of Iraq and literally hand-carried them to all of the universities in Iraq. We had to put the lectures on DVD to provide much-needed resources for students and faculty in Iraq.”

In total, 267 scholars have been awarded 422 grants (including 155 renewal grants) through ISRP, Miller says. A total of 70, or 42 percent of alumni of the program, have returned to Iraq, according to IIE data, and, in most cases, to the same universities where they once taught.

Based on IIE reports from the more than 200 Iraqi scholars who have taken up Scholar Rescue Fund fellowship positions to date, the program has resulted in educational output by them of instruction to more than 10,000 students, including 4,000 by distance learning; publication of more than 500 articles or books, participation in 100s of scientific research projects; and presentation of dozens of papers at conferences across the world.



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While down from 2006–07 levels, violence directed at academics continues at a high rate, Miller says. “We’ve documented a dozen assassinations of academics in the last two years,” says IIE’s Miller. “In any other country in the world there would be an outcry if four university professors were killed in the last six months, but in Iraq it has left the front pages.” Attacks involving higher education institutions have included attacks during final exams and at graduation ceremonies, Miller says.

“Many academics in Iraq today have learned to maintain a low profile,” Miller says. “Unfortunately, in recent years, applications have started to come to us from professors reporting death threats from militant students demanding higher marks or a passing grade. Many times, the scholars feel the necessity to cave for their own security, giving the grade, often a ‘C’ instead of a ‘D.’”

**A large difference for many international partnerships has been the proliferation of video conferencing facilities in Iraq, which allow ready exchange of ideas between continents without the dangers and costs involved in physical travel.**

“With regard to violence and the general security situation, it is undoubtedly true that a lack of security is one of the major problems that are challenging our academic life and educational programs due to many limitations imposed on our educational institutions,” says Bashar M. Mizaal, a University of Baghdad instructor of English translation who participated in

the ULP exchange with GSU. “For example, due to security problems we cannot expand the evening studies time [on campus] after 6:00 p.m. and in many cases this time is reduced to 4:30 p.m. due to security concern; which means less hours of study. Psychologically, insecurities make students reluctant to come to college and also students are less active when the situation outside the college is tense.”

In such a climate, many Iraqi scholars decline to return. “I cannot go back now, it’s madness,” says Abdul Sattar Al Mamouri, a professor of comparative literature and Middle Eastern studies at Duke University. Al Mamouri fled from Iraq in 2005: “My office in *The Baghdad Mirror*, which I edited, was demolished by a car bomb in an attempt on my life. After that I became a dean of the College of Arts at Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, and this time the Mahdi Army militia surrounded my office and I was forced to resign.”

“So far, Iraq is ripped with sectarian conflict and there is a lack of will for a national reconciliation,” says

Al Mamouri. “The theocratic regime of Iraq cannot protect the liberal minds, intellectuals, and academic freedom. The country remains an urban jungle, with a lack of security, public services, and political will. We need a functioning representative government that protects freedom of speech, free press, and academic freedom with a real interest in rebuilding the country to catch up with the world. Money and power are the motto of the Iraqi politicians now.”

Those dangers notwithstanding, many say progress is being made. Academics continue to delicately make visits. And a large difference for many international partnerships has been the proliferation of video conferencing facilities in Iraq, which allow ready exchange of ideas between continents without the dangers and costs involved in physical travel.

## **Study Abroad Scholarships**

A major source of financial support for U.S.-Iraqi partnerships are several scholarship programs from different government organizations in Iraq, including the KRG. The scholarship programs are supplying U.S. universities with a steady stream of Iraqi university faculty, staff, and graduate students, in the hopes they will return and repopulate a Iraqi professional class decimated by war and emigration. They include programs run by the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research; the Higher Committee for Educational Development (HCED), which is affiliated with the Iraqi Prime Minister’s office; and the Human Capacity Development Program (HCDP), which is administered by the KRG’s Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

HCED, for example, has secured more than 1,500 admissions for master’s and doctorate students, including 697 students in the United States, according to a fact sheet from EducationUSA. Representatives of both the Ministry of Higher Education and HCED says that most scholarship grantees have returned to Iraq.

Despite the increasing sectarian nature of the conflict in Iraq, one education executive insisted that its allocation of scholarships has remained above such pressures. “We get 1,000 scholarships a year from the prime minister’s budget divided among Iraqi province by population,” says Dr. Zuhair Humadi, General Director, HCED, a NAFSA Cassandra Pyle award recipient. “Everyone is getting an opportunity to compete for these scholarships through competition among students in provinces. Twenty-four percent of our applicants are female and 25 percent of scholarship holders are female based on competi-



tion without quotas. None of our scholarships has been awarded through sectarianism ethnicity.”

Still, Humadi notes that Iraq faces large challenges. “Unfortunately, because of three or four wars in the past 40 years and sanctions from 1990 to 2003 there has been an upheaval in Iraqi society,” says Humadi. “There is a lot of corruption and big problems. The most important problems to deal with, however, are administrative problems. When you go to a typical Iraqi government organization, the system they have is old, dysfunctional and corrupt. For our scholarships, we set up a new administrative system that



Ammar Azeez Al-Sahrawi, the deputy cultural attaché at the Iraqi embassy's Washington, D.C. cultural office, which is involved in administering the Ministry of Higher Education's scholarship program.

catered to those who will use it. We announced scholarships online and students apply online and when we select them, they come for the interview. No other Iraqi system or government agency does that.”

Prospective Iraqi students and U.S. higher education institutions are able to market to each other through a series of fairs. A third annual HCED Baghdad Education Fair took place in Baghdad in September 2013 to introduce institutions to 3,000 Iraqi scholarship students who are interested in studying in the United States. Forty-five U.S., UK, and Australian institutions attended this recent fair.

In June 2013 a U.S.-Iraq Higher Education Conference was held in Washington, D.C., bringing together Iraqi higher education officials and others involved in partnership efforts, as well representatives of the three Iraqi scholarship programs and others to counsel U.S. higher education institutions regarding how they can best target Iraqi scholarship students, with representatives of about 80 U.S. universities.

English remains a challenge for many students coming to the United States. Some students request “conditional admission” because they cannot score high enough on TOEFL tests to be directly admitted to academic programs, says Ammar Azeez Al-Sahrawi, the deputy cultural attaché at the Iraqi embassy's Washington, D.C. cultural office, which is involved in administering the Ministry of Higher Education's scholarship program.

The Ministry of Higher Education scholarship programs also include several short-term research-focused programs, including one allowing Iraqi university faculty with doctoral degrees to do short term research at universities abroad for up to a year, short term student research for Iraqi graduate programs if resources and facilities are not available in Iraq, and faculty training programs where Iraqi university faculty can participate in one to two months of training at a U.S. university to observe American colleagues in the same field of study, Al-Sahrawi says.

A large question is to what degree current cooperative ventures can be sustained after the departure of the United States from the area. “The Iraqis are not reluctant to partner with U.S. institutions; the difficulty is in the capacity of U.S. higher education institutions to work there,” says the University of Kentucky's Gaffield. “With USAID and Department of State getting substantially cut [Gaffield notes that the overall U.S. Fiscal Year 2014 bilateral assistance request for Iraq represents a 53 percent reduction from FY 2012 budget levels, according to the FY 2014 Congressional Budget Justification]; it is not clear if U.S. universities have the wherewithal to go over there. However, if funding were not a major issue, then there could definitely be a future for these kinds of collaborations. Since there is oil wealth there and education is a national priority, not just in the south but also in the Kurdish region, I think that there is reason to be optimistic.”

It is clear that there are hopes that the Iraqi government's support for partnerships will increase. “We are hopeful that the government, whether in Baghdad or Erbil [the capital of Iraq's Kurdish region], will try to fund those initiatives,” says Lorna Middlebrough, education specialist for Iraq at the U.S. State Department. **IE**

**DAVID TOBENKIN** is a freelance reporter based in Chevy Chase, Maryland. His last article for *IE* was “Shared Solutions” about cross-border academic research collaborations between higher education institutions in the United States and Mexico, which appeared in the May/June 2013 issue.