

outbursts

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Boosting universities in Iraqi Kurdistan

Program helps educators forge relationships with their counterparts at Virginia Tech

By Rich Mathieson

When a university group from Iraq's northern Kurdish region traveled to study at Virginia Tech this summer, their home was at peace. But by the time the 14 administrators and faculty members arrived in Blacksburg, fighters with the Islamic State had taken surprise aim at the region's capital and more than 1,700 people had been killed.

"In our region, there was an anxiety against these terrorist forces, but when we left, there was not the sense that Irbil was in danger," said Hawraz Hama, of the University of Raparin, about 70 miles east of the Kurdish capital. "But it's important for us to come to Virginia Tech and be part of this program, because in our country higher education needs to be improved. This could be a turning point in my life."

The educators were part the Iraqi Kurdistan Rural Universities Partnership Program, an initiative funded by the U.S. Embassy in



Participants in the Iraqi Kurdistan Rural Universities Partnership Program pose on graduation day with professors and administrators from the Language and Culture Institute.

Iraq and run by the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute in partnership with the Washington nonprofit IREX. The program's goal is to build sustainable relationships between universities in rural Kurdistan and the U.S. and to help advance English language departments in the region. In addition to Raparin, the program also includes the University of Halabja and the University of Zakho. Each was founded in the past 10 years.

Participants say the program, which has just been authorized for a second year at Virginia Tech, is vital because strengthening the region's education system is key to fostering long-term stability. Such initiatives, they say, can also help stem the rise

of militant groups such as the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

"Universities are the places where we can lead society to be a model society," said Paiman Ahmad, from Raparin. "When we build up our education, we start seeing improvements elsewhere."

"One of our main goals was to move from a 'classical' model of teaching, where a professor stands and lectures with very little interaction with students, to a 'modern' model and student-centered teaching," Ahmad said. "The old way is

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The Language and Culture Institute's Elsie Paredes (left) and Liz Bowles (second from left), who both taught courses in Iraqi Kurdistan as part of the program, talk with participants at The Inn at Virginia Tech.

common across Iraq, but we are younger, we want to embed new technology, new pedagogy to help us stand out."

Developing relationships

Lori Mason, the project director at IREX, said the U.S. Embassy has a keen interest in supporting these rural universities. "The Iraqi Kurdistan region has been developing very quickly over the past 20 years. In the urban areas, the development is rapid, and there are a lot of opportunities for engagement with the outside academic community. That hasn't been the case for the rural university," she said.

According to Mason, the program was designed so that colleagues in Kurdistan and the U.S. would develop mutual understanding and cultural awareness in order to establish sustainable relationships and professional networks for academic collaboration.

Don Back directs the Language and Culture Institute and led workshops for the Kurdish administrators. He said the program is an example of Virginia Tech's land-grant mission.

"From a global higher-education perspective, it's in the interest of both U.S. and international universities to form partnerships," Back said. "Such collaborations allow us at Virginia Tech to really share the best of our university while also helping address the specific challenges that confront Iraqi Kurdistan."

Ultimately, he said, the partnership could lead to collaborative research opportunities

and student and faculty exchanges.

In-country and online

The program began in January with intensive workshops in Irbil. Led by faculty from the Language and Culture Institute, the training focused on topics such as curriculum design and instructional methods for English language faculty as well as academic leadership. Participants were introduced to tools such as Moodle, an open-source learning platform. Ribwar Mohammed, who is in charge of curriculum development at Raparin, said his university is already using the online course management system to help professors interact with their students.

Back said Moodle allows Raparin faculty to put syllabi online and provides greater access to students. "It's gratifying," he said, "to see firsthand something that we had introduced being very effectively used."

Following the workshops, the institute's faculty led semesterlong online courses. "It was intensive training," said Hama, the chair of Raparin's English department. "We faced different assignments regarding leadership, professional development, university governance, and being a good leader. It was also good to be introduced to so many new online tools."

The program's capstone experience brought the Kurdish educators to Virginia Tech for three weeks. For many, it was their first trip to the United States.

"Before coming to Virginia Tech, most of my

information about the United States came from TV or movies," Hama said. "I expected that American people to be, let's say, not helpful, based on the movies. But when I arrived in Washington, and at Virginia Tech, I found that on the contrary, American people are very helpful and very friendly, and they are ready to help if you need help."

In Blacksburg, participants met with university leaders, observed classes, conducted research, and participated in a variety of cultural experiences, including a hike up the Cascades and a trip to hear the old-time music at the Floyd Country Store's famous Friday Night Jamboree.

Returning results

Mohammed said he was returning home with a sense of optimism, despite the ongoing violence. "I have lots of ideas now on how the University of Raparin can continue to succeed," he said.

Hama said he has already instituted changes at his university based on what he learned during the program. The university has approved curriculum reforms that he says will better prepare future English teachers. Courses on some traditional linguistic subjects were eliminated and ones on classroom management, teaching methodologies, and materials design were added. Hama said the Virginia Tech program "accelerated the process of improving the quality of education at our new established universities."

Back said IREX has approved Virginia Tech to continue the program in 2015.

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