

DEMOCRATIZATION AND RADICALIZATION IN
IRAQI CAMPUSES

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IRAQI PROSPECT ORGANISATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Iraqi Universities – A Background	5
Picking Up The Pieces	7
Student Life in Iraq	9
The Role of External Groups and Radicalization on Campus	11
Democracy Promotion – IPO’s Experiences on Campus	14
Conclusion	24
About the IPO	26

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From their heyday in the 1970s and 80s, Iraq's Universities have undergone a steady decline. Decades of existence under a repressive regime together with economic disasters of wars and sanctions have left much of the intellectual and physical infrastructure in pieces. Following the Iraq war in 2003, universities mirrored the rest of the country in terms of the tremendous upheaval they experienced, a period that fostered hope as well as anxiety over the as of yet uncertain future of the country.

Liberated from the binds of dictatorship, universities have become the hub for the myriad of religious, political and social movements newly emerging after decades of suppression. With this influx, universities have witnessed the radicalization of the student body as differing ideologies compete for ascendancy and influence on campus. This has led to an increase in tensions on campus with intimidation and acts of violence against staff and students becoming a significant problem there, threatening the new freedoms students have enjoyed since the collapse of the Baath regime.

In order to counter this worrying trend of radicalization, the Iraqi Prospect Organisation has run several democracy promotion projects at Iraqi universities over the past three years. Our experiences have showed us that there is a strong desire on the part of students to embrace democratic principles in order to express their views and concerns in an effective manner. Moreover, we have found that projects that foster these very tools of dialogue and tolerance can effectively undermine the radicalizing elements on campus and consolidate democratic principles amongst a crucial section of Iraq's civil society.

This report gives a brief overview of the state of Iraq's universities and student life as well as a synopsis of IPO's activities at Iraqi universities over the past three years.

IRAQI UNIVERSITIES – A BACKGROUND

Iraq's current higher education system comprises 20 universities and 47 technical institutes under the management of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). This includes 200 colleges, 800 departments, and 28 research centers. The UNESCO survey of 2004 found a total student enrollment of 251175, 42% of whom are women. Almost 50% of the students are enrolled at the 5 universities in Baghdad¹.

From being regarded as the best learning institutions in the region, Iraq's universities have undergone a steady decline after decades of totalitarian rule, chronic under funding and a series of destructive wars.

Intellectual output from universities declined markedly from the 1980s onwards following purges of the faculty of at first suspected communists and from then on suspected regime dissidents. Intellectual freedom was markedly curtailed and promotion within university departments depended more on Baath party loyalty than on merit. Favoritism also extended to the funding of universities with the more established institutions such as the University of Baghdad being neglected in favor of newly formed establishments such as Saddam University that were designed to cater for the Baath party elite.

Whilst academics previously enjoyed the right to travel freely abroad to conferences and meetings, travel restrictions by the regime prevented all but high-ranking Baath party members from interacting with their international counterparts. Economic sanctions following the Gulf War in 1991 put a further strain on universities that prevented them from updating their libraries and research equipment. The internet revolution of the '90s also passed Iraq by,

¹ Iraq Education In Transition, Needs and Challenges, UNESCO 2004
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001386/138665e.pdf>

further isolating universities from the outside world. Furthermore it is estimated that 30-40% of the best trained professors have emigrated since 1990.

Thus the combination of a repressive regime, economic pressures of wars and sanctions as well as chronic corruption and mismanagement led to the systematic physical and intellectual destruction of Iraq's universities. By the time the Iraq war in 2003 occurred, the once prestigious institutions of learning in Iraq had been reduced to a shadow of their former selves.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

It is estimated that as much as 84% of university facilities and assets were destroyed or stolen during the war in 2003 and its aftermath². Most of the damage occurred during the looting of university facilities immediately after the war, where valuable equipment and research data were stolen or destroyed.

The war however also brought with it the chance for Iraqi universities to once again open up to the outside world. The Coalition Provisional Authority instituted sweeping changes to the higher education system by dismissing all the presidents, deans of Iraqi universities as well as most heads of department. Subsequent elections were held for the vacant positions and most universities were running within weeks of the declaration of the end of hostilities. Further reform of admissions policy and educational structure were implemented to varying degrees of success and a systematic purge of Baathist courses and literature was carried out, replacing them with material covering issues such as democracy, human rights and globalization.

Apart from the budget of \$500 million assigned by the United States for the reconstruction of Iraq's universities, funding from outside agencies was pledged to aid the reconstruction effort. UNESCO pledged a total of \$100M to rebuild mostly physical infrastructure and USAID assigned \$20M for projects that created partnerships between foreign universities and their Iraqi counterparts.

Whilst progress in reconstruction has been made, many believe that it has happened far too slowly. The latest UN report published after a UNESCO roundtable on university reconstruction in 2005³ found that only 40% of university infrastructure has been repaired to date, 30,000 computers were

² Jairam Reddy, director of the United Nations University (UNU) International Leadership Institute

³ Roundtable was convened by UNESCO on 22/23 February 2005, Paris

needed and over 2,000 laboratories still needed equipping⁴. Universities, like the rest of the country still suffered from unreliable electricity and water supply.

On the other hand teacher upgrading supported by UNESCO and the World Bank has created 4300 new jobs in the universities. A ‘virtual science library’ has been set up to allow several of Iraq’s universities access to over 17,000 research journals⁵ and a similar initiative is running via the British Council in Iraq⁶. Collaborative projects involving foreign universities providing training and exchange programs with their Iraqi counterparts have also been established via USAID⁷.

The security situation in Iraq has taken a big toll on the university faculty. It is estimated that between 100 and 250 Iraqi academics have been killed since the end of the war and many more have fled Iraq’s violence⁸. Approximately one-third of remaining professors hold only a bachelor's degree, despite rules requiring a master's degree.

⁴ The Current Status and Future Prospects for the transformation and Reconstruction of the Higher

Education System in Iraq, UNU. May 2005. <http://www.unu.edu/news/ili/Iraq.doc>.

⁵ See <https://ivsl.org/enter.html> for more details

⁶ See <http://www.britishcouncil.org/iraq.htm> for more details

⁷ These include ‘Al-Sharaka’ Program for Higher Education in Iraq and the SBU-Iraq HEAD Program

⁸ Estimates vary widely with the United Nations giving a figure of 100 in 2004 and the Brussels Tribunal documenting 250.

STUDENT LIFE IN IRAQ

Iraqi universities have finally emerged from decades of decay and isolation. The desire of Iraqis to rebuild their once prestigious university system has driven a vast number of projects and interactions with the outside world. These institutions still face considerable problems with regards to the lack of funds and crippling violence but students and faculty have proven to be both resilient and resourceful enough to overcome these issues in the long term. Universities play a crucial role in the generation of progressive ideas and the building of a civil society capable of consolidating Iraq's nascent democracy.

It is estimated that there are currently over 250,000 students in Iraq's higher education system⁹. There is no barrier to higher education in Iraq once secondary education is completed, but access to courses is dependent on academic performance rather than student preference. Whilst there have been plans to reform the admissions policy and curriculum, actual progress in these areas have not been achieved on the ground.

Iraqi Student unions have been set up subsequent to the war and replaced the old Baath party student union that was the only organization allowed on campus prior to this. The Baath party student union was just another extension of the hyper-centralized state whose function was to disseminate Baath party propaganda as well as monitor student activities throughout the country. However, currently these newly formed Iraqi Student Unions are somewhat ignored on campus with no real understanding of their structure and purpose. This invariably has led to the majority of student activities carrying on despite these 'student unions' rather than through them and thus many student activities are somewhat ad-hoc and uncoordinated.

⁹ Iraq Education In Transition, Needs and Challenges, UNESCO 2004
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001386/138665e.pdf>

The economic and security situation in post-war Iraq has put severe limitations on the extra-curricular activities of students. Students are not entitled to any sort of financial assistance currently and in most cases, students are relied upon to contribute to their family's income after university hours, thus restricting their free time. It is estimated that unemployment rate amongst university graduates is in the region of 37% which impacts student outlook on their future significantly. Studying towards a degree that may not guarantee a job has led many to make the difficult choice of attending infrequently or even leaving.

The security situation also plays its role on curbing extra-curricular activities as students try to minimize their trips to campus as they try to limit their exposure to the ever present dangers of Iraq today. This is a major issue faced by students particularly in cities such as Baghdad that is home to over half of the Iraqi student population. Furthermore, the state of emergency in the country means that attendance can be variable as students are not exempt from curfews and travel restrictions. However, university campuses have proven to be havens for students, isolated away from the insecurity in the rest of Iraq, they give students breathing space and a chance to partake in extra-curricular activities. This has allowed many programs and projects to run on campus that range from the cultural and abstract to the political and current.

The entrance of unrestricted internet to university campuses as well as the proliferation of internet cafes in cities has allowed Iraqi students unprecedented opportunity to communicate with the outside world. Isolated and deprived of information for so long, students have taken any opportunity they can to utilize this gateway to the outside world. Internet connections at university are however few and unreliable forcing the majority to pay for access at internet cafes. Nevertheless, young Iraqis have embraced the internet with vigor and moreover the proliferation of phenomena such as personal blogs from Iraq has demonstrated that this is not just a one-way communication of ideas as the freedom to express opinions and beliefs is not taken for granted here.

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL GROUPS AND RADICALIZATION ON CAMPUS

As mentioned previously, there were no non-Baath party student societies in existence prior to the war and regime-sponsored student groups acted as policemen monitoring and intimidating the student body in an attempt at preventing any source of dissent. Rather than places of political and social dialogue, universities were just another means of indoctrination and control by the state where students were actively coerced into joining the Baath party. After the war, a myriad of student societies sprang up, some of which were student-led and others that were sponsored by external political and religious groups.

Whilst the politicization and radicalization of students during a period of tremendous upheaval that followed the war is to some degree expected, the role of external political and religious groups in encouraging this phenomenon is certainly significant. The changing nature of posters and banners around campus since the war serves to highlight these effects. Immediately after the war most material and posters on campus reflected the excitement of students freely expressing their views for the first time with slogans such as “Yes, Yes to freedom”, anti-Baath messages or those stressing unity and ‘Iraqiness’ as well as the visible displays of religious material that had previously been banned by the old regime. However, these were soon replaced by posters of political leaders and political banners vying for the now much contested wall space.

Political parties viewed universities as a battleground for ideas as well as fertile recruiting grounds for young active members. However, their entrance into campus was not just a one way process as many students who identified with particular religious and political groups naturally felt that promoting particular ideas and personalities at university was a duty on their part and actually pushed for a larger and more active presence there.

Student groups energized by the freedom to express previously concealed views were not as accustomed to tolerating the myriad of differing and even conflicting beliefs now on display at university. There have been many incidents on campus where certain political and religious factions have clashed with others involving threats and intimidation as well as actual violence. Assassinations of faculty members have also been reported and tensions especially around recent elections have been high¹⁰.

Many students and members of the faculty view the politicization of the student body with alarm and dismay. They view university as a sanctuary from the political and sectarian battles taking place outside of campus. This opinion is not universally shared, and many other students believe that there is no more appropriate venue for the battle of ideas and future of Iraq than at university.

Currently, almost every political party is represented by a 'student' society at university. Taking the University of Baghdad as an example, SCIRI, Dawah, Sadrists, Kurdish alliance all have their own student groups as well as a number of smaller groupings affiliated to others. Most of these groups are involved in holding events, publishing party material as well as providing the numbers at political rallies and protests.

Religious parties on campus seem to enjoy broad support, a fact that is reflected by the high attendance seen at their events there. Religious identity, just as much as political beliefs were repressed under the previous regime and many see the public display of religiosity as a reaction to the secular totalitarianism of the Baath party that terrorized university campuses in the past. Hard-line religious groups have however emerged on campus and their activities are frequently at odds with the secular atmosphere many students enjoyed previous to the war.

¹⁰ Student extremism brings violence and chaos to Iraq's Universities. Oliver Poole, The Daily Telegraph,

1st Jan 2006

Death to those who speak out, **Annia Ciezadlo, The Christian Science Monitor April 30 2004**

There have been several incidents publicized involving the intimidation of students and faculty by these groups.

The politicization of universities has allowed conflicts taking place in the larger context of Iraq to enter and complicate relationships between students. The rise in sectarian tensions across Iraq has been mirrored amongst the student body. Whilst not suffering from the same degree of mistrust as that which exists on the Iraqi street currently, the shift in mood on campus is palpable. In response to this, there have been numerous student-led initiatives, of differing degrees of success, aimed at promoting reconciliation and dialogue on campus. Whilst possessing noble aims, these initiatives seem to lack the organizational skill and vision needed to make a significant impact on campus as well as the wider Iraqi social and political landscape.

The government has recently attempted to dampen tension on campus by ordering a ban on overt political activity at universities. This ban whilst seeming to be a death knell for the political groups on campus is viewed by most as an empty threat by authorities. Most students and faculty do not believe that the government has the political will or the capabilities to curb political activity on campus.

The lack of a strong and active student union during these tumultuous times has contributed to the fragmented nature of the student body in Iraq. Students currently lack cohesion and a platform to unite under and they are instead divided across the same religious and political lines that run through the rest of the country. Initiatives designed to promote dialogue on campus have so far been small-scale and uncoordinated.

DEMOCRACY PROMOTION – IPO’S EXPERIENCES ON CAMPUS

In an initiative designed to diffuse tensions on campus and counter the radicalization at university, the Babylon Democracy Promotion project began on August 15th 2004. It set out to encourage the students at the University of Babylon in Hillah, Iraq, to express their opinions freely about any issue, whether it be related to university life, politics, religion or simply being a student, and to tolerate the views of others. The project also sought to encourage respect for the freedom of individuals and increase students’ understanding of democracy. The project aimed to meet these goals through a student-run fortnightly newsletter and student debates.

The newsletter and debating society, called Al-Iraqi (The Iraqi), was initially met with much suspicion by students and staff who were used to decades of propaganda being fed to them. The university even refused to allow distribution of the newsletter on campus and thus distribution of the newsletter was restricted to outside campus grounds. However, when students saw that the newsletter was encouraging them to submit articles and that many articles were being published from varying opinions without censorship, they began to warm to the newsletter and submissions began to increase rapidly.

The major break through occurred when the committee announced the Annual General Meeting and asked for members of the society to freely submit nominations for the 2005-06 committee. This changed the perception of the society both within the student population but also with university staff since they could see the project was a student run project without a political agenda that offered a medium for students to express their opinions, share ideas and debate.

Membership swelled to over 300, 27 nominations were submitted and 135 students attended the AGM and cast their votes. University staff opened their doors and even allowed the AGM to take place on campus. The student union took it upon themselves to distribute the newsletter on campus. While the university initially turned a blind eye to this since it had changed its perception of the newsletter, later in the academic year it officially made an exception for Al-Iraqi to its rule banning the distribution of written material on campus.

The greatest impact the project did make was the change in atmosphere felt at Babylon University. Through the newsletter and debates, students felt confident in expressing their opinions and began to expect their opinions to be challenged by others. Whether it is through articles on university life, politics, religion, the rights of women, etc. the project provided a platform for discussions and the exchange of ideas to flourish.

The Debates – Fostering Tolerance and Freedom of Opinion

The project held a total of 21 debates. Topics for the debates ranged widely and initially politically sensitive topics were avoided in order to allow participants to get used to the format and atmosphere of debates. The initial debate concerned the idea of uniform at university, a topic that whilst not being the most sensitive, concerned all students equally. Very soon topics moved to more current and significant issues such as the role of religion and state, women and the constitution, political activism on campus and the Islamic veil and limits to freedom.

The debates were lively and on several occasions attracted local media to cover the event. Several students particularly became fond of the debates and the chance it presented for them to allow them to express their opinions to an audience and to improve their arguments. Students actually continued to hold debates even after the project officially ended in August 2005.

The Newsletter – *Giving students a voice*

From the outset, one of the aims of the project was to provide a moderate form of religion to combat the extremism and radical movements gripping many university campuses in Iraq, including the University of Babylon. The project therefore intentionally dedicated four pages of the newsletter to religious affairs, as well as ensured that some religious matters are covered within debates. This strategy has encouraged articles and debate participation from varying sides of the religious spectrum, and has advanced a progressive and moderate viewpoint on campuses.

A case in point is the fact that Al-Iraqi society managed to overtake the Islamic Student Union, aligned to the radical cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr, as the largest university society. Moreover many of Muqtada's supporters are now actually abandoning their original loyalties and views and joining the Al-Iraqi.

Another example was demonstrated by an article published in the early issues of the newsletter which described how Arab democrats like Chibli Mallat were inspired by the late Islamic thinker and scholar, Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, for his essentially democratic ideology. Supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr were deeply unhappy with the article and were causing great tensions with Al-Iraqi, claiming that the article wrongfully labels Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr as a democrat and a "tool of America". As the newsletter has a policy of publishing varying viewpoints, Muqtada's supporters were invited to submit an article stating their own opinions of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr's ideology – this in itself was a shock to them and made them take a step back and re-think their outlook on the issue. Although they did not submit a rebuttal to that particular article, they have warmed to the society and are now regular contributors to the newsletter and debates.

The Student Affairs section has become essential reading for many students and staff and truly reflects life at the University of Babylon. It has also become a leading advocate of student rights and grievances on campus, demonstrating to

them that non-violent and organized pressure can achieve more satisfactory results than the more familiar alternatives.

Miss Jinan Kadhim Ahdhya, 3rd Year Sociology Student:

"You have definitely proved your success, distinction, and neutrality. You have indeed been our voice when we have had no voice and our ears when no other would hear our calls. I salute you with all my heart for the bravery that your newspaper possesses, which is our newspaper. I wish you success in serving this country."

One of the most successful columns that the newsletter has run was 'I Want This Resolved', in which an article by a student is published regarding a particular problem they have at university. In many instances the submissions were investigative articles which exposed a problem at the university and which commonly led to the university taking action.

Examples of successful newsletter campaigns are listed below:

- ◆ Issue 3: An article was written about the poor state of student accommodation, the risks this posed and the shortcomings of the university. Within a few days of the issue being published all the student accommodations were revamped with new carpet, new fridges and were generally cleaned out.
- ◆ Issue 16: An article questioned why the university had failed to recognize students who had graduated with merits or distinctions. After the issue was published the provincial council of Babylon invited all new graduates with merits or distinctions to a special ceremony in their honor.
- ◆ Issue 17: A powerful editorial was written about the state of the university campus, how trash was over-flowing and how this affected the mood of students and risked their health. Only 2 days

after the issue was distributed the university took the unprecedented step of launching a mass clean up operation and even planted the first trees on the campus to improve the studying environment for students!

- ◆ Issue 19: An article by a student revealed that the university had a secret internet room on campus, but this was purely restricted for staff use. Following this article the university made the internet room available for students to use on certain days of the week.

Following the success of the Babylon Democracy Promotion project, a Baghdad University Democracy Promotion (BUDP) project began in August 15 2005. Run along the same lines as its predecessor, BUDP again quickly became the focal point of student issues on campus and provided students with a platform to express their views as well as expose them to other viewpoints in a democratic atmosphere.

These successes did not prevent the project running into difficulties on campus. A constant source of friction was the relationship of BUDP with the student group linked to Muqtada Al-Sadr. Carrying on from the successful strategy of BDP, the society attempted to coax the more radical students groups into participating in the dialogue created by the newsletter and debates on campus. This strategy initially seemed successful with more and more students from the 'Muqtada group' started to participate in BUDP debates and newsletter.

Things however changed at the Annual General Meeting held on April 15th 2006 to appoint a new committee. The prospect of open democratic elections increased membership to 513 members and a total of 28 nominations (13 females and 15 males) were submitted for 9 positions. Seven females and two males were elected. The high proportion of females elected was a reflection of the active role female students have played in both democracy projects, successfully breaking previously held prejudice and stereotypes.

A high ranking member of the Muqtada group nominated himself for the position of Editor-in-Chief. He was easily defeated by Miss Zahra Noor Al-Deen who received 184 votes. Having being beaten, he then accused the organization and society of being a 'Zionist' outfit. The head of the Muqtada group in the university took this cause up and started issuing leaflets indirectly accusing the work of the newsletter and debating team of being Zionists and saying it was not permissible to join them or to help them.

The newsletter team responded by printing all the details of the events in the next issue which won them the support of the student body. However, the team began to be harassed by the Muqtada group. The BUDP committee received lots of support from ordinary students and even from the less hardcore elements of the Muqtada group and it was clear that the public relations element of this incident was easily being won by the newsletter. However, the Muqtada group stepped up their harassment of the team and when the next issue of the newsletter was published; they collected many copies and burnt them publicly. They also distributed an answer from Muqtada himself in which they had asked him 'There are Zionists groups (implying, but not stating the IPO) operating in the university, what should be do?'

He replied that based on the presumption in the question then you should not join or interact with these groups. This also had an effect of scaring some members from further participation. This delayed the production of the later issues and eventually issue 17 and 18 were issued through quieter methods so that the members would not be harassed.

This experience demonstrated the difficult and sometimes precarious nature of democracy promotion on campuses radicalized since the end of the Iraq conflict. However it has also demonstrated radicalization on campus can be significantly undermined by providing alternative methods for students to express themselves and highlight their concerns and frustrations, leaving those unwilling to participate isolated and ultimately insignificant.

The relatively small projects that the IPO have undertaken at these two universities have nevertheless created a significant impact on the atmosphere around campus by diffusing tensions through dialogue rather than intimidation and violence. It has also empowered students to push their concerns and grievances to higher authorities in a legitimate and organized manner.

One of the most important aspects of these projects is the demonstration of genuine democracy on campus. The equal opportunity given to students of all opinions to express their views in the newsletter and at debates, without censorship or favoritism, has fostered a culture of tolerance and respect of individuals. A student society based on a constitution gave both the coordinators, as well as members of the society, the opportunity to practice democracy on campus – coordinators are bound by their constitutional rights and duties, and the members were given the opportunity to participate in a free and fair election, as well as the opportunity to freely express their opinions without censorship or prejudice. An IPO policy of only allowing members to serve one year as a committee member has also ensured the maximum opportunity for those interested to involve themselves in this project.

The Poll - Student Attitudes towards Democracy

In order to obtain an accurate picture of Iraqi students' attitudes and understanding of democracy, the IPO organized a poll in March 2005 that involved over 950 students at 4 different universities in Baghdad, Basra and Mosul.

What was concluded from the poll was the existence of broad support for democracy to establish itself in Iraq, and furthermore there was strong expectation and a desire for its consolidation within the upcoming few years. The results also highlighted the lack of in-depth understanding of the term democracy on the part of students. There was poor recognition of what are considered essential components of democracy as well as a perception that democratic characteristics, such as the existence of multiple opinions or political trends within a society, were synonymous with a country's instability.

The enthusiasm for democracy found from the poll demonstrated the need to develop of a more in-depth understanding of the subject amongst young Iraqis. The awareness of this need led the IPO to begin a new initiative at Iraq's universities that was linked to the formulation of the country's new constitution. The Iraqi Youth Constitution Consultation Project – Empowering students

The Constitution Project – *Education and Consultation*

The Iraqi Youth Constitution Consultation Project (IYCCP) that began in July 2005 involved universities in Baghdad, Hilla and Nasiriyah. It was designed to firstly educate Iraqi students about the core aspects of a democratic constitution and secondly to consult their views as to what their desires were for the Iraqi constitution. Furthermore it also sought to involve Iraqi students in the political process taking place at that time.

The IYCCP topics covered issues such as the role of religion and state, the concept of federalism, presidential vs. parliamentary systems, human rights and others. The first session involved a presentation that covered a constitutional topic and demonstrated how it is implemented in different democracies across the world. The second session then involved a small-group workshop that allowed students to discuss how they would like to see Iraq's constitution address that particular topic. The consolidation of the suggestions/demands would take place at the end through the voting of the most popular suggestions. A final conference would take place following a set of sessions that served to present a list of national student demands to the public. A final set of demands was also presented to the president of the Iraqi Constitutional Committee during the official drafting phase of the Iraqi Constitution.

Despite the serious security situation, there was a consistent and stable attendance seen at the sessions that averaged 110 students at each university. Debates were lively and of a high standard, focusing on the principle issues that underlined each topic. Issues such as Federalism and the role of religion and state were sensitive issues that divided people across the country. Students however managed to debate these difficult and divisive topics logically and calmly. Students were encouraged by session coordinators to develop their arguments and present their case effectively to their peers.

The IYCCP built on the successes of the IPO's democracy promotion projects by educating and fostering debate on topics core to the Iraqi constitution and democracy and very relevant to students during a transitional period for the country. It also demonstrated to students the possibility for them to become involved in the political process through in an effective and democratic way. The ability to lobby a democratic government effectively is still a new concept for these young Iraqis but through projects such as the IYCCP, they can begin to understand the potential that exists to bring their ideas and concerns to the relevant authorities.

CONCLUSION

Iraq's university system emerging from war, dictatorship and economic sanctions has a great deal to overcome before it can once again reclaim its place at the pinnacle of learning in the region. Staff and students who have only experienced the stifling atmosphere of a repressive regime have now to contend with a world that has moved on immeasurably since Iraq's international isolation since the 1980s.

The political, religious and social forces that currently grip Iraq have not spared university campuses. Student groups backed by the various political and religious players on the Iraqi scene compete on university campus for influence and control. The aspirations for Iraq's universities to foster a liberal and tolerant atmosphere conducive to progressive thought seem in jeopardy in the face of the increasing radicalization of the student body. There have been many reported incidents of intimidation and violence against faculty and students that threaten the recovery of Iraq's intellectual institutions.

Through projects aimed at educating, promoting dialogue and discussion as well as fostering tolerance on campus, the Iraqi Prospect Organisation has sought to curb this worrying trend of radicalization. The three years of work at several of Iraq's universities has shown this to be possible and has demonstrated a genuine desire on the part of students to embrace the democracy that the Iraq war sought to bring. The newsletter and debating societies have flourished on campus due to the great enthusiasm on the part of students and the Constitutional Consultation program demonstrated the ability of Iraqi students to effectively present their vision for Iraq's future.

Offering Iraq's university an alternative way of expressing the many ideas, opinions and frustrations that have lain dormant for decades can successfully

curb the extremist and radical tendencies on campus. The IPO's work has highlighted the great need for projects that promote democratic principles as well as projects that provide students with the necessary tools to play an effective part in Iraq's road towards a stable democracy. The youth of Iraq will play a pivotal role in shaping Iraq's future, whether it is on the path towards democracy or not rests largely on how their environment and experiences shape them in turn.

ABOUT THE IRAQI PROSPECT ORGANISATION

The Iraqi Prospect Organization (IPO), a not-for-profit and non-partisan group, was established in January 2002 by a group of Iraqi exiles in London. Following the fall of Saddam's regime, the IPO expanded to Iraq, where its headquarters now resides. The IPO aims to promote the establishment of a proportional democracy, increase understanding amongst young Iraqi men and women about democratic values and civil society, and increase the participation of young Iraqi men and women in the political process. Through activities such as educational workshops, newsletters and debating societies, IPO has managed to achieve a genuine grassroots presence in the country.

The IPO is run by an executive committee and supporting staff, who together form the current 'active' membership and who number 39 and are based in Baghdad, Hilla and Nasiriyah. Total membership of the IPO is over 1000 young Iraqi men and women (approximately 450 in Baghdad, 350 in Hilla, 100 in Najaf, 90 in Nassiriyah, and 100 other members elsewhere in Iraq and the world).

Focusing on promoting tolerance, freedom of speech, and democratic values the IPO established debating societies and newsletters in universities in Baghdad and Hilla. In September 2003, IPO established debating societies at the University of Baghdad and the University of Mustansiriyah. At the same time, it began publishing a student newsletter, 'Al-Jame-a' at both universities. IPO established a similar project at the University of Babylon in Hilla with a debating society in October 2004, and another student newsletter, 'Al-Iraqi'. These projects are ongoing and have helped tackled radicalization on university campuses.

In November 2003, IPO started the "Iraq Constitution Project", an initiative intended to engage young Iraqi men and women in discussions on constitutional issues, as part of the national debate on the drafting of Iraq's permanent

constitution. The project published a report entitled "Iraqi Constitution: Iraqi Thoughts" in December 2003, which was based on several roundtable discussions in Baghdad, Najaf, Nasiriyah, Al-Ramadi, and London. As part of the project the IPO polled 834 students between December 2004 and January 2005 in the universities of Baghdad, Mustansiriya, Basra and Mosul to assess student's understanding of democracy and secularism and their attitudes towards these issues. The findings of the poll were published in the report "Attitudes Towards Democracy" (March 2005) and is available online at:

<http://www.iprospect.org.uk/Attitudes%20Towards%20Democracy.pdf>.

Following on from that was the Iraqi Youth Constitutional Participation Program (IYCPP), an educational and consultation program started in 2005 that gave Iraqi youth and students the opportunity to participate in the constitutional drafting process of Iraq. The program consisted of a series of lectures, workshops and concluding conferences that concerned aspects of the constitution relevant to the youth. The ideas and conclusions from these activities were presented to the constitutional drafting committee. Lately, this project has been expanded to include legislative, as well as constitutional, issues which concern Iraq's youth.

In March 2004, when the Governing Council were debating what type of electoral system to use for the January elections, we published a report in both Arabic and English entitled 'Considerations for an Electoral System for Iraq's Transition Period', which systematically explained each electoral system in straight forward Arabic/English and highlighted the main advantages and disadvantages of each system for Iraq. The entire report was printed in Al-Sabah newspaper (which is the most read Iraqi daily) and was also widely circulated within the Governing Council and Coalition Provisional Authority and is available online at:

http://www.iprospect.org.uk/Iraq_Elections.pdf

In July 2004, we published a pocket-sized booklet for potential candidates for Iraq's first elections on how to conduct a campaign. The booklet, which is in

Arabic, was distributed at the National Conference in Baghdad and is available online at: <http://www.iprospect.org.uk/campaign.pdf>

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