



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Fulbright Scholars Want to Pave Way to Brighter Future for Iraq

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The flagship international exchange program sponsored by the United States Government, *the Fulbright Program*, is designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. It promotes leadership development through learning and international cooperation. The Fulbright Program operates in more than 155 countries and has provided over 285,000 participants - chosen for their academic merit and leadership potential - with the opportunity to study, teach and conduct research in each others' countries and exchange programs. Approximately 7,000 grants are awarded annually. Hundreds of Fulbright alumni worldwide currently hold top positions in government, higher education, journalism, law, and the private sector, but in Iraq, these organizations are barely functioning and the potential benefits of the Fulbright program to Iraq are not being maximized.

This program is one of the best counters to the crippling “brain drain” occurring in Iraq, where thousands of educated Iraqis have fled the country due to war, in order to pursue opportunities elsewhere in the world. In a time when the US Military spends so much time and effort rebuilding Iraq’s physical infrastructure, it is exciting to see the US State Department implement this program, which brings Iraqis to America to receive graduate education. The Fulbright grant, which pays full tuition and a decent stipend, is the greatest investment targeted to revive Iraq’s intellectual infrastructure. I am confident that this program is the most sustainable program implemented in Iraq to date.

Despite these promising facts, the implementation misses some very crucial opportunities to develop and truly flex the assets created by the Fulbright program during study as well as upon graduation and subsequent return to Iraq. The following topics are those developed by the pool of current Iraqi students and graduates:

- *Approved Field of Studies:* The basis upon which Fulbright selects the approved fields of study during the application process is currently unclear and does not match with the needs of Iraq today. What is perfectly clear is the need to carefully design the application fields according to the current stage of development in Iraq. For example, in 2008, four of the available application fields for the northern region were for health care management; while none of them were dedicated to education. This was a surprising considering the fact that Iraq is in desperate need for education reform. The Ministry of Education haphazardly applies a “trial and error” process to their syllabi development to find the best combination

that suits the expectation of Iraqi people, but meanwhile, there is no consistency from school to school and the children are the ones who end up paying the price. On the other hand, since the health care system in Iraq is centralized and government subsidized, creating more “experts” in middle level management in the local government will not have a big impact; especially since the primary problem with health care in Iraq is lack of medical infrastructure and equipment, not management. This is only one of several examples of the mismatching between study fields and the real need of current Iraq. There should be a due diligence in form of interviews with different ministries and government directories to see what are the real needs of the country before making any decision about types of fields of study made available each year.

- *Graduate, return to Iraq, and then what?* The Fulbright program would better meet its mission to promote collaboration between the US and Iraq, if it completed the full life cycle of its graduates. Currently, the program’s cycle ends with the graduation of Fulbrighters but does not guide the Iraqi government to benefit from the years of high-level education and cultural crosstalk in which the US Government has invested. This loose end has bad consequences; for example, many Fulbright alumni opt out of returning to Iraq, because they know that the government will not benefit from their skills because they will not have opportunities to be placed in positions that match their skills. The majority of Fulbright alumni disappear into the Iraqi populace and return to jobs with insignificant ability to impact the future of Iraq. Is that the ultimate goal of Fulbright program, especially in such a strategically important region of the world for the United States? If the US Department of State wants to see the true impact of this program, it must link the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs to the Iraqi local government, they can work parallel to the US State Department’s Provincial Reconstruction Teams currently embedded in various districts in Iraq. This coordination would only require the passing of alumni information to the local government to which a Fulbright alumni plans to return to live and work. A small coordination project will do this task. In this way, the Fulbrighter, the US State Department and the local government would benefit by the skills developed through the Fulbright program and could work together in the development or improvement of local governance. Fulbright provides a unique opportunity to combine the best knowledge and skills obtained from great universities in the United States with an expert understanding of the local national situation and an ability to communicate that to the State Department in Iraq in their own language. For the United States to get the biggest “bang for their buck,” they must apply these efforts to rally all of our skills into a full-package “tiger team.”
- *Orientation and Post-Graduate Training:* Most incoming Fulbrighters miss the pre-academic program because of the late approval of their Student Visas. The pre-academic program is very crucial to bridge the large gap between the education system in Iraq and the one in the United States. Between cultural differences and language barriers, new Fulbrighters face a “double whammy” and do not get the opportunity that other international students receive to acclimate to a new country before the academic year begins. The State Department should partner with the INS to ensure that Fulbrighters receive their Visas at least two weeks before orientation begins, in order to find housing, set-up banking, and utilities. On the other side of the timeline, the Fulbright program should facilitate additional specialized training to apply the skills learned in America to Iraq. For example, after

receiving a Masters in Engineering, Fulbrighters can benefit from special training needed to apply the GIS system in Iraq, where there are many infrastructural and technological limitations.

Iraqi Fulbrighters are eager to go back to their country to help their government better serve the needs of their people. We learn great ideas during our studies in the United States and want to apply those that would most greatly impact the current situation in Iraq. We need new blood and opportunities to lead our country; this is our only hope to finally meet the needs and expectations of the Iraqi people.

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