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A Law Library Development Project in Iraq

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A Law Library Development Project in Iraq: Looking Back Two Years Later

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Sometimes you get a chance to work on a project so complex, even you don't come to fully understand its impact until years later. At least that has been the experience for me regarding the opportunity I had to work in Iraq with the International Human Rights Law Institute (IHRLI) from February 2004 to January 1, 2006. As I reported in a previous essay, IHRLI, an institute of the DePaul University College of Law headed by Cherif Bassiouni, received a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Higher Education and Development (HEAD) contract to work with three Iraqi law schools.[1] The contract was initially proposed as a three-year plan to help Iraqi law schools overcome the effects of more than twenty years of economic, physical, and intellectual isolation. The complete project included a program for clinical legal education, curriculum reform, rule of law, and library and educational technology.

All of the goals for the program were extremely ambitious. The situation of the law schools in Iraq really didn't allow for anything smaller in scope. Three law schools were selected to work with, one each from the three major geographic regions of Iraq. The following is a contemporaneous description of the project. It was written about mid-way through the actual time spent in country; however, at the time we thought the program was just about to end.

Perspective While In-Country.

The overall objective for the library component of the program is to assist each of the three Iraqi colleges in restoring and upgrading its library and research technology support services. The project is intended to provide technical assistance in library planning and management

techniques, critical assessment of existing needs, and support for library acquisitions. Also, collaborative relationships among the libraries are to be promoted in order to enhance services at each school. Implementation is proceeding in four phases:

1. Physical plant renovations,

2. Equipment procurement and installation,

3. Staff training and development, and

4. Acquisitions and collections development.

Accomplishing this in three geographically dispersed schools is a logical plan, but a very ambitious one.

Perhaps as an omen of things to come, even before I was hired the program had changed one of the participating schools for security reasons. It still covers the three major geographic regions: the University of Baghdad Law School in the central region, the University of Basra Law School in the heavily Shiite south, and the University of Sulaimaniya Law School in the Kurdish northern region. Each school faces a slightly different set of challenges.

The law school at Baghdad is the oldest of the three schools. After looters burned the law school's collection of textbooks, the dean had the library doors welded shut and then bricked over. Through his quick thinking and the work of the staff, the majority of the collection is battered but intact. However, they did lose their card catalog and shelf list.

The library at the University of Basra Law School suffered the worst instances of looting and physical destruction. Because of Basra's strategic location, it has, in every war, taken a heavy beating. The library staff and law faculty saved as much as they could by taking books to their homes, but they were able to save only about a third of the collection. In addition, all financial support to the law library in Basra has been cut off since 1985.

The University of Sulaimaniya Law School is the newest of the schools, actually only a few years old. It is located in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region and therefore did not have to deal with looting. The books that it does own are in excellent condition; however, it just does not have many books at all. The law school was established during the sanctions period and the law school had no access to outside materials—not even to other materials located elsewhere in Iraq. The biggest physical challenge in Sulaimaniya is the space constraints.

The security situation and travel restrictions have slowed all aspects of the program. At times, progress is so slow that it is hard to see at all. Slowly, however, progress is being made.[2]

Looking Back After Two Years

By the time I left Iraq on New Year's Day 2006, the library portion of the program had lasted just shy of two years. This is not to say that we had received two years of funding. Rather, USAID had done periodic "no cost" extensions to allow for the slowness caused by the security situation. My understanding is that none of the HEAD programs were actually *funded* by USAID past the first year.[3] Despite this, we did in fact substantially complete all four implementation phases for these three law schools.

Physical plant renovations in all three locations included installation of adjustable steel shelving meeting ANSI standards, air conditioning equipment to maintain both temperature and humidity, and large generators to ensure that all of the equipment could be run. Library equipment was purchased and installed, including computer workstations for both staff and patrons, microform readers and cabinets, printers, scanners, and Ariel interlibrary loan software from Infotrieve to allow the start of ILL document sharing.

Staff training had taken place on multiple levels—in-house training with me at each library, and two separate, sequenced sessions on using OCLC to catalog their collections. The

latter sessions took place in Amman, Jordan and brought in experts from Arabian Advanced Systems, Zayed University in Dubai, the American University in Cairo, and the University of Pennsylvania. The logistical hurdles involved in getting the Iraqi librarians to Amman and coordinating the training are still frankly mind boggling to me. A great number of the librarians were women and so needed the permission of the responsible male in their life to attend. [4] Next, everyone needed two sets of permission letters from the dean of their law school; one showing that the needed to travel on school business to Baghdad to obtain their visas and/or passports, and a second showing that they then needed to travel to Amman on school business for the library training. These letters also had to be approved by each university president. Then we needed to bring everyone from Basra and Sulaimaniya to Baghdad via AirServe – an airlines that operates for humanitarian organizations. Flights from Basra and Sulaimaniya don't operate on the same days, meaning that everyone had to be put up in a safe hotel. Getting people into and out of the Baghdad airport was a logistical adventure of its own. On the first trip I was located in Baghdad and could help, but by the second trip I was no longer headquartered in Baghdad and was not allowed to leave the airport compound. Juggling AirServe schedules, visa and passport issues, travelling with some people who had never left their country before, negotiating the training with OCLC, making sure there was enough cash on hand to cover necessary expenses and unforeseen emergencies, making sure everyone got the appropriate length visas while in Amman… well, they just do not teach you about that in library school!

Giving credit where credit is due – Arthur Smith from OCLC and William J. Kopycki from the University of Pennsylvania were the drivers of the U.S. – side planning of the training events. And I don't think I could have accomplished anything while in Iraq with Z., my translator, office administrator and general right-hand man for everybody in the project. The fact

that we were able to arrange not only the first such training event, but also a second advanced

cataloging event almost qualifies as a modern miracle. I think the training opportunities and the

chance to interact with both the trainers and the other Iraqi librarians made these trips one of the

major successes of the library program overall.

The program supplied each law library with a copy of the Arabic Subject Headings

Thesaurus, the Dewey Decimal Classification schedule, the Arabic AACR2, and with OCLC

Connexion software and accounts. OCLC on its own extended the accounts for at least one year

beyond the subscription period purchased through the program.

Lastly, on the acquisitions front, online databases, major microform collections, and both

western and Arabic-language hard copy materials were purchased for each institution. More

importantly, connections were re-established between the library staff and major legal book

vendors both within Iraq and within the region.

As I left Iraq, I felt that the library program had been a very narrow success. There were

some major disappointments—things that I was sure we should have been able to accomplish

were left undone. And, the successes, while real, were barely a drop in the ocean of what was

needed. One of my biggest regrets was that we were not able to get the Iraqi's into the U.S. for

the Annual Conference of the American Association of Law Libraries. I went into full details in

my blog at the time.[5] At the time, I thought that particular endeavor was a complete failure – the

biggest failure of the program. Actually though, that ended up being a watershed in my

relationships with the librarians. I ceased being an outsider and was considered much more a

colleague – someone they could work *with*. Now I think that the biggest failing of the program

was that it ended. The program did a lot of good, and provided access to both materials and

training that otherwise would not have been available for perhaps years. The Iraqis made

impressive improvements. Government funding sources don't seem to want to make multi-year commitments, but you can't overcome 20 years of isolation in two years. A different model is needed.

Looking Forward

At the risk of being eminently prepared to fight the previous war, I do think that my experience in Iraq yields some lessons learned worth noting. Two years later, I'm able to see more of the whole of the project and its actual impact as opposed to the intimate details and the e desired impact. Two observations jump out at me at this point.   The first observation applies generally to library development initiatives—these kinds of projects by nature are, and actually *should be,* decentralized, flexible responses to local needs. A second observation applies specifically to law library and rule of law initiatives, and that is that any law library development program that is going to support rule of law needs to have a strong government documents component.

In post-conflict or post-disaster situations there is always going to be a trade-off between coordinated response and rapid response. Much of the literature analyzing library development in Iraq laments the lack of coordination in the various programs. Jeff Spurr from Harvard has a great amount of experience in assisting libraries in post-conflict situations, and his are some of the most passionate calls for coordination in library development initiatives.   He states, "Coordination and control are the bywords that should govern all outside assistance to Iraqi academic libraries."[6]While I like the coordination aspect to an extent, I couldn't disagree more with the control aspect. Academic law libraries are a narrowly focused, highly specialized category of special libraries. Placing the category of academic law libraries into a post-conflict situation narrows that focus even further. Then, limiting your concern to academic law libraries,

in a post-conflict situation, in Iraq, you might suppose you had narrowed your category about as far as it could be narrowed. And even so we found that the needs of the three libraries we worked with were very different. They needed different things, and different strategies were required to work effectively with the library personnel in each location.

I find, then, that to expect funding agencies to come together and map out a fully coordinated library development agenda that addresses the needs of all libraries in a country, whether academic, medical, public, or school library, to be impracticable in the extreme. If library development projects continue in the aid paradigm—where donor nations give assistance to recipient nations—then I can't think of a more offensive approach than having the donor nations control what the recipient nations receive. It is amazing how quickly a patronizing tone can creep into even the best-intentioned program.

Even the coordination aspect has some troubling implications. First, Spurr seems to lay the requirement of coordination on both the funding agencies and on the library profession. For the funding agencies, as I stated above, I just don't find that realistic. I do agree that coordination of programs for library development is a responsibility of the library profession as a whole. Sadly, post-conflict librarianship has become enough of a common endeavor that there has been at least one "best practices" manual published on the topic.[7] And yet, as interested as I am in the topic, I could not tell you the one place or even the few places to go to find the current library development projects in process. This is coordination I would like to see. Not a top-down, imposed coordination on libraries receiving assistance, but a crowd-sourced clearinghouse of current projects, best practices, and basic components of library development. Indeed, Spurr mentions the IraqCrisis listserv as the closest thing there was to a coordinating body for library development in Iraq. This pre-coordination does rest squarely on the shoulders of the library

profession. This approach avoids the waste of duplicated efforts across projects, while still

allowing local needs to drive the specific details and timing of each individual project.

As noted above, my second observation is that any law library development program that

is intended to support rule of law needs to have a strong government documents component.

You will notice that my brief overview of the goals of the IHRLI project and its results makes no

mention of any government documents components. Looking back, this is a major flaw in the

design of the program. Defining what exactly "the rule of law" means has filled volumes and

volumes. My favorite definition is one I find clear and succinct: "The Rule of Law means

equality before the law and a system of government constrained by the law."[8] It seems so

obvious that systematic collection and storage of the documents produced by a government, and

then making those documents available to the governed, is a necessary prerequisite for

establishing the rule of law—so obvious that it should go without saying. But it went without

saying in the design of the IHRLI project. And then when we did have a chance to work

collaboratively with the Iraq National Library and Archive, it was deemed to be out of the scope

of our project and we were not allowed to expend funds in that manner. That was a flaw in the

design, but it was also a failure on my part to argue effectively to the funding agency the obvious

ways such collaboration supported our project. At the time, I considered this something extra that

would have been nice, but not really part of my core objectives. Looking back, I consider this a

glaring missed opportunity.

Putting my two lessons learned together, I propose that it is part of our professional

responsibility as librarians to start putting together a crowd-sourced clearinghouse of current

international government documents projects, best practices, and definitions of what the basic

components of government documents library development would be. I'd also like to see our

professional associations get back into the business of funding library development projects. That is the only way I see to fund the kind of long-term development relationships that have the time to do more than just slap a bandage on the problem. Soon there will be a Law Library Designer/Documentalist for UNDP/Sudan heading off to Juba in Southern Sudan. "Among other responsibilities, the expert will be expected to design lay-out of library facility, review of existing classification system for cataloguing of all laws, legal materials, books, journals, magazines, assist in the preparation of bibliographic summaries, train MoLACD library staff on how to administer and manage the library, and draft library usage policy for review by MoLACD leadership."[9] This person will be overwhelmed with all that needs to be done, and the short six-month time period in which to do it. I'd like for this person to have the support of the entire library profession. I've also seen a renewed civilian interest in working with Iraq development now that our military involvement may be winding down. So perhaps soon we may be able to participate in project design or assisting librarians there as well. Not many of us are in the position to be able to pick up and go for six months or two years or more to practice our vocation internationally. But we are in the position to act as a clearinghouse of resources, information, and expertise to those who are able to take such positions. Then they can use their time and expertise in selecting the appropriate resources and adapting them to meet the need "on the ground"—wherever that ground might be.

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1. Kimberli A. Morris, "The Spirit of Law Librarianship: Legal Education Reform in Iraq," in *The Spirit of Law Librarianship: a Reader*, compiled by Roy M. Mersky and Richard A. Leiter (Chicago: Alert Publications, 2005), 239.

2. Ibid., 241-242

3. Jeff Spurr, *Iraqi Libraries and Archives in Peril: Survival in a Time of Invasion, Chaos, and Civil Conflict, a Report*, 2007, oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/update_2007.htm.

4. Before judging this statement too harshly with Western eyes, consider this vignette: There's the old joke of the woman who needs her son's permission to travel to visit her daughter in the U.S. So the guard makes her bring her son, saying he won't issue the visa without his permission. The son shows up and says he won't give his mother permission to travel. The guard, after making the mother go get the son to obtain his permission, then starts beating the son for refusing to give it. The guard beats the son and shouts 'how dare you disobey your mother!' Haider Ala Hamoudi, "Women's Rights in the Islamist Movements"muslimlawprof.org/page/2.aspx

5. Kimberli Morris, The Baghdad Biblio-Files. www.personal.psu.edu/kam59/The Baghdad Biblio-Files.htm

6. Jeff Spurr, "Lessons for Assistance to Iraq Libraries Derived from Similar Efforts to Assist Bosnian Libraries after the 1992-1996 War," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 38, no. 1, (2004): 28

7. Book Aid International, *Best Practice Guidelines For Book Aid Programmes In Conflict / Post Conflict / Natural Disaster Situations,* 2005, www.cilip.org.uk/informationadvice/international/baibestpractice.htm; Ian M. Johnson, "The Impact on Libraries and Archives in Iraq of War and Looting in 2003 – A Preliminary

Assessment of the Damage and Subsequent Reconstruction Efforts," *International Information & Library Review* 37 (2005): 209-271.

8. Thomas Szasz, *Fatal Freedom: The Ethics and Politics of Suicide* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 50.

9. Jacqueline Gichinga, "Expert Needed: Law Library Designer/Documentalist for UNDP/Sudan," e-mail to Law-Lib, March 17, 2009.