2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-First Iraqi Fulbright Scholar Reflects on Time in America-

Boutros Boutros-Ghali was a Fulbright Research Scholar at Columbia University (1954-1955) and later became Egypt's Deputy Prime Minister of Foreign Affairs and Secretary of the United Nations

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Baghdad - Before arriving in the United States in 2004 as the first post-Saddam recipient of a scholarship from the Fulbright student exchange program, Ali thought he knew "everything he needed to know" about America.

Ali (whose real name remains protected for security reasons), however, admitted he "knew just enough" to understand that studying in America was crucial to obtaining the skills necessary for his country's reconstruction effort, which he desperately wanted to join.

In addition to receiving an excellent education, Ali said he discovered that Americans were curious about Iraq and concerned about conditions in the country. That and his welcoming treatment as a foreign guest, he added, were in some respects as memorable and lasting as the professional knowledge he gained during his stay.

The Iraqi, now an official in his Government, recently sat down with the author, also an alumnus of the Program, to share his thoughts on the benefits of his Fulbright grant and overall experience in America.

As a Fulbright scholar Ali lived for two years in a major city in the eastern United States, where he studied in one of the top graduate management programs in the country. After earning his master's degree, Ali returned to Baghdad in 2006 to assume an important position in government.

"Looking back at my time in America," he recalled, "I learned so much more than how to design and manage multi-million dollar development projects properly. I saw everything America has to offer – from a system of higher education to institutions of democratic government that really work."

Asserting that these aspects of American society reinforce one another, Ali praised America's post-secondary educational system for preparing graduates for future employment by matching curricula with requisite job skills. "Getting a job in America," observed Ali, "depends on educational achievement and professional qualifications. Professors know this and teach accordingly."

Most importantly, observed Ali, "I saw the real America and I spoke with real Americans." Reminiscing about his travels to several northeastern cities, Ali described his many conversations with Americans from all walks of life. "No matter with whom I spoke, whether a taxi driver in Philadelphia or my neighbor, an 80-year-old woman and retired American diplomat, I became convinced of Americans' sincerity and of why they want to help Iraqis rebuild our country."

Ali noted that prior to the 1990s many Iraqi scholars and professionals had studied in the United States and Western Europe and returned to Iraq with superb English and technical skills. But during the 1990's a whole generation of Iraqis had been left behind, he lamented. "It's like we young Iraqis have to start all over with none of the benefits of an international education."

Because of his own experience, Ali plans to encourage other accomplished Iraqi scholars and professionals to apply for Fulbright grants. "If we want to rebuild our country, to build a prosperous and safe democratic society, more Iraqis need the kind of tools only offered in America. More Iraqis need to see the real America, as I have. More academic and professional exchanges between America and Iraq are in both of our countries' interests."

The Fulbright program, established in 1946, is named after the late J. William Fulbright (1905-1995), a U.S. senator from the State of Arkansas who was dedicated to promoting international educational exchanges. Its goal is "to increase mutual understanding between the peoples of the United States and other countries through the exchange of persons, knowledge, and skills."

Often described as a "mainstay of America's public-diplomacy efforts," the Fulbright Foreign Student Program is administered by the State Department's bureau of educational and cultural affairs and brings citizens of other countries to the United States for Master's degree or Ph.D. study at U.S. universities or other appropriate institutions.

As of 2007, more that 300,000 Fulbrighters from approximately 180 countries have participated in the Program including 18 Fulbrighters who became heads of state or government and 37 who received the Nobel Prize.

More than 1,800 new Foreign Fulbright Fellows enter U.S. academic programs each year studying at universities throughout the United States. Foreign students apply for Fulbright Fellowships through the Fulbright Commission/Foundation or U.S. Embassy in their home countries.

In mid-April, the U.S. Embassy in Iraq announced the 2009 Fulbright Scholarship competition for Iraqi scholars to pursue graduate-level academic programs in the U.S., particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

The bi-national Fulbright Selection Committee at the U.S. Embassy selects candidates from a variety of academic fields who collectively represent the social, political and cultural diversity of Iraq. For details on the Fulbright program, including requirements for candidates and the review process,
visit: http://iraq.usembassy.gov/iraq/fulbright.html

(Steve Gillen is a Press Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. In 1997, he received a Fulbright grant to conduct graduate research on local self-government at the Law Faculty of the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius in Skopje, Macedonia.)