



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

## 2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

### -Iraqi, American Poetry Reading Bridges Cultural Divides-

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January 22, 2008

**Baghdad** - The power of poetry to transcend politics and bridge cultural divides came alive January 15 at the First Annual Iraqi/American Poetry Reading, sponsored by the U.S. Embassy in partnership with the Iraqi Tawasin Cultural Society.

The spirit of humanity embodied in the universal language of poetry momentarily surmounted the political and economic challenges facing this nation as members of the Iraqi literary community joined American and other Coalition representatives at the al Rasheed Hotel event.

Iraqi poet Mohammed Rasim Kasim, President of the Tawasin Cultural Assembly, set the tone for the “cultural, poetic and musical evening” describing poetry as a “cultural bridge between East and West.” It is a “universal language that...sensitizes emotions...[and] distances human kind from...daily sadness and burdens,” he said.

Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who holds a university degree in literature, told the well-attended gathering, “One of the treasures of poetry is that it allows full equality to all artists and freedom of expression in what defines a truly democratic society.”

The diplomat then went on to read two works by contemporary Iraqi poets who have achieved international renown: Fadhil al Azzawi and Mahdi Muhammed Ali. Crocker’s reading as well as others was accompanied by four Iraqi musicians playing the guitar-like Oud and drums.

Crocker was joined at the event by Polish Ambassador Gen. Edward Pietrzyk whose arm was still encased in a therapeutic bandage after being seriously wounded in a terrorist attack in Baghdad last October.

The reading was sponsored by the U.S. Embassy’s Cultural Affairs Office whose acting director, Patrick Ventrell, recited Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening;’ the evocative word painting of duty and love of nature that earned Frost the reputation as America’s “peoples” poet.

Ventrell said the poetry reading was “especially remarkable” because “this is one of the first times Iraqis and Americans could openly share their interests in each others cultures. It was just a wonderful public display of mutual understanding.”



Al-Rashid Hotel - Baghdad U.S. Embassy Spokesperson Mirembe Nantongo Reads for the First Annual Bicultural Poetry Reading

Diane Siebrandt, an archeologist who works as a cultural heritage liaison officer in Ventrell's office and who helped organize and moderate the event, explained, "We work closely with the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and our discussions often involve proposals for different programs."

Recently, she said the Cultural Affairs Office sent six Iraqis on a "Performing Arts in U.S. Society" International Visitors Leadership Program. "The participants engaged with Americans in the areas of music, theater, art and dance and visited museums, schools, universities, NGOs and other performing arts venues," Siebrandt said.

U.S. Embassy Spokesperson Mirembe Nantongo captured the international flavor of the event as the Tanzanian-born, U.K.-educated Foreign Service Officer read a selection from American poet Elizabeth Bishop.

Although Bishop was Poet Laureate of the United States from 1949 to 1950 she traveled widely, living in France and settling in Brazil for 15 years before she died in 1979. Travel and changing landscapes, both metaphorically and literally, provided themes and images that pervaded her poetry as well as her existence.

In "The End of March," read by Nantongo, Bishop's stroll along a cold and windy beach in New England matches the trajectory of a life that had seemingly become alienated from normal human comfort but still yearned for the "lion sun" of youth and previous happiness.

For Iraqi poet Ahmed Jalil Alwayes, regret and despair are emotions that tug at his existence but must be fought. In his poem, "Only for Everyone Do I set Ablaze the Rose of Peace," he declares, "If, despite the grief, he embraces the perfume of this soil that splashes the sparrows above each alleyway and door, I will bear the brownness of my age and extinguish this ruin.

"I belong to the date palm, in which the entire people of Iraq takes refuge....It fills me with tenderness – the remains of my forefathers. I cleanse the sun of love," he recited.

Fellow Iraqi poet Omer Al Saraay also read his work, "Opera of a City" to the assemblage.

The Tawasin Cultural Society, headquartered in Baghdad, was established in 2004 with the idea of building bridges of cultural understanding between eastern and western societies. The society is composed of local poets, artists and musicians who create cultural connections through workshops, seminars and festivals that promote all aspects of the performing arts.

The bulk of their accomplishments have been in Iraq, but they have held successful seminars and programs in Germany as well. While the focus of their work has been within the local population of Iraq, the society wishes to create connections between Iraqis and Americans, especially those currently residing in Iraq.

Their motto, "Art in service of peace and freedom," is practiced through their freedom to express cultural and artistic opinions through poetry, theatre, music and the plastic arts, while encouraging others to do the same. The society is dedicated to promoting the arts throughout Iraq in often difficult situations. In addition to supporting and promoting the cultural arts, the society encourages and supports women's rights and youth development programs.