Building a New Library in a War-torn Country and the Importance of Partnership

By Amed Demirhan

After more than 20 years of war and dictatorship in Iraq, the universities and libraries like many other institutions have been strongly diminished. However, after the war of 2003 that toppled the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq opened to the world, particularly the Kurdistan Federal Region in northern Iraq. I was appointed in September 2006 to build a new library for the newly established University of Kurdistan-Hawler, an English-language university. Soon, I discovered the challenge of international transportation of books and serious limitations of the local market in building a library collection. The South East Florida Library Information Network (seflin.org), together with Florida Atlantic University Library and the U.S. Army Civil Affairs Team in Hawler (Erbil), Federal Region of Kurdistan – Iraq, played an important role in partly overcoming this isolation. The American Library Association’s professional rules, regulations, and publications were very helpful for our local staff development.

After arriving to Hawler (Erbil), the capital of Kurdistan Federal Region of Iraq, I visited several libraries, but to my surprise they were still operating with card catalogs and many of their library materials were outdated. In addition, like some other Middle Eastern countries, the libraries were used as a depository and had closed stacks. Furthermore, the majority of people who were making decisions about libraries were not professionally trained librarians and the number of librarians with BA degrees in librarianship totaled about fifteen people in all three provinces governed by the Kurdistan Federal Region. All of them were educated in Baghdad and Mosul; no one had a Master’s Degree in Library and Information Science. However, those who had a BA were overburdened with many duties and few or very limited opportunities for professional development.

Because of the economic embargos, sanctions and wars, the library supplies were almost non-existent; library furniture, equipment, and even simple cataloging and circulation supplies were hard to come by. Even after the economic sanctions were removed, the market has not recovered and despite a safe environment in Kurdistan Federal Region many suppliers still

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stay away because simply the name “Iraq” has been so strongly tied to the war and terror.

However, this difficult position created an opportunity to be more assertive and to increase one’s desire to become part of building a contemporary library. I was quite fortunate to be entrusted to build a new library for the University of Kurdistan-Hawler (UKH). The University Rector said that the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region, Mr. Nechirwan Barzani, had asked him to build a modern University in highest Western academic standards. This was the most important guideline I received.

One of the first things I did was to design a vision and mission statement that would correspond to the vision of the founder of the University of Kurdistan-Hawler. I contacted the Executive Director of the South East Florida Library Information Network, Mr. Tom Sloan, and asked his advice. Mr. Sloan, in addition to much good advice, offered to send us some academic books from South East Florida. However, the transportation of the library materials was a serious issue as there weren’t direct flights from the U.S. and it is very expensive to transport from the U.S. to Iraq. The challenge was not just immediate access to the material, but even with access there were still serious transportation issues.

Together with Mr. Sloan we asked several U.S. government agencies for help with book transportation and after eight months of dead ends we were finally referred to the U.S. Army Civil Affairs Unit in Hawler (Erbil). We were very fortunate to have the Commanding Officer Lt. Colonel Howard Schaffer in Hawler. After a visit to the library by Lt. Colonel Schaffer and a long conversation about our challenges, he decided not just to help us with transportation of donated library materials, but he also started a campaign among U.S. soldiers to donate books. He became a well-welcomed visitor of the University of Kurdistan-Hawler Library and sometimes joined us and our students for lively discussions in academic matters and challenges. After Lt. Colonel Schaffer left, several succeeding teams of Civil Affairs have continued donating books to the library and helping with the transportation of library materials from Florida Atlantic University and SEFLIN.

Furthermore, SEFLIN has been available for many library related issues and creating several other opportunities for helping the UK-H Library. One of them was the donation of some online training classes for the library staff and another was an attempt to create an Electronic Interlibrary Loan between the UK-H Library and the Florida Atlantic University Library. We are still hoping to create this Electronic Interlibrary Loan as it is very important to improve our access to more resources and building real bridges between and among Kurdistan-Iraq and US libraries.

Another important event for the UKH library came in January 2008 when it became a member of the American Library Association (ALA). This membership has been important for the library’s connectivity and development. ALA publications have become important sources particularly for our local staff’s education and for us to keep up with professional development in the library field. The ALA articles regarding the “Libraries Bill of Rights” and “Code of Ethics” have become cornerstones for library operations, and they are properly displayed on the library bulletin board.

When I look back to these relations and cooperation among different institutions, I see the moral and psychological value of these relationships far exceeds the material values. Having relationships with the South East Florida Library Information Network and the Florida Atlantic University Libraries has had a great impact on our students and staff in the sense of connectivity and being part of a bigger world after their many years of isolation.

Despite its small size the University of Kurdistan-Hawler Library probably is the only library in all of Iraq and perhaps the Middle East that provides its students, staff, and customers with unrestricted Internet access and a wealth of online resources, and an open stacks print collection. It adheres to copyright laws voluntarily and makes service to its clients the highest priority. It is one of the very first institutions to publish its work report online for transparency and accountability. Those institutions that have been cooperating with the UK-H Library can be very proud of their cooperation and we are looking for many more international relations and interlibrary cooperation.

The library’s webpage can be found at http://www.ukh.ac/library/

Mr. Demirhan is Director of the library at the new University of Kurdistan-Hawler.