

March 2010

BAX & kf iraq
BRITISH-ARAB EXCHANGES | Health • Education • Civil Society

BUILDING THE FUTURE

A leadership training programme for young Iraqi professionals in England and Northern Ireland



cultural exchange... leadership... community-building

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1 INTRODUCTION

In March 2010, five young professionals from Iraq visited the UK on a three-week cultural exchange programme focusing on leadership and community-building skills.

The delegation was selected and hosted by British-Arab Exchanges (BAX) and KF Iraq, two NGOs working to create links between the UK and Arab countries and strengthen civil society in Iraq.

BAX arranges exchanges that enable British and Arab students or young professionals to meet and to gain an understanding of each other's countries. In the course of their visit, participants are given insight into the other country's history, culture and society, while developing their own social, professional and leadership skills. Thirty-seven exchange visits have taken place since 1973, with more than 200 young people participating from Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Iraq, Britain, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Central to this work is a focus on shared moral and spiritual values between countries and cultures, collaborative learning, and a recognition of the importance of personal attitudes and relationships in situations of crisis and change.

KF Iraq is a charitable foundation that promotes the social development of the Iraqi people and supports the rebuilding of a strong and viable civil society in a land ravaged by years of violence, dictatorship, sanctions and war. KF Iraq advances this mission primarily by funding and managing health and education projects that are effective, sustainable and of direct benefit to the people of Iraq, regardless of religion, ethnicity and social background.

2 THE PROGRAMME

2.1 Background

The Building the Future 2010 programme was devised by BAX in partnership with KF Iraq, building on the success of a pilot scheme in 2008. That programme pioneered leadership development training for young Iraqi professionals such as doctors and teachers through training and events in London, Oxford and Northern Ireland. Feedback from both participants and programme providers was extremely positive. Following the visit, Nihad al-Samarrai, the delegation mentor, asked BAX and KF Iraq to host a second delegation.

2.2 Aims of the programme

- to encourage dialogue and build closer links between Britain and Iraq
- to train future Iraqi opinion leaders in leadership, community-building and teamwork
- to develop the interpersonal skills and attitudes that can contribute to reconciliation and reconstruction
- to create a network of young Iraqi professionals with a commitment to the rebuilding of their country's civil society

2.3 Selection process

The aim was to invite a group of emerging civil society leaders representative of the different cultural, political and religious backgrounds that make up Iraqi society, and from different parts of the country. The programme was designed for young professionals already established in sectors such as education, medicine, politics and the media.

Suitable candidates were identified by KF Iraq and Nihad al-Samarrai, and invited to apply. Selection was made on the basis of written submissions and telephone interviews according to candidates'

- interest in the reconstruction of their country, and willingness to take initiatives within Iraq
- openness to exchange with other cultures and communities
- region and community in Iraq
- English language skills.

2.4 Participants

The five-strong Iraqi group was made up of three men and two women, and included two medical doctors, a media professional, an architect and a university lecturer. They were aged 26 to 31, of a variety of religious and ethnic backgrounds, and came from Baghdad, Kirkuk and Halabja.

2.5 Structure of the programme

The programme comprised 15 days in London, a day visit to Oxford, and four days in Northern Ireland. During their stay, the delegation were hosted by the Northern Ireland Assembly, ex-combatants from different communities on housing estates in Belfast, members of both Houses of Parliament, were interviewed at the BBC, gave formal and informal presentations to invited audiences and benefited from professional placements relevant to their respective fields.

In London they were accommodated at the Victoria headquarters of Initiatives of Change (IofC), an international movement devoted to trust-building with which BAX has had a long association. In Belfast, they stayed at the Stormont Hotel, close to the Assembly buildings.

A formal framework was provided by daily leadership and communication training sessions with Judi Conner, which built up to a final presentation at a farewell reception on 30 March. The group also participated in a seminar on Experiences in peace-making, led by Peter Riddell, which drew on case-studies from post-war Europe and northern Nigeria. There was an additional half-day training session with Krish Raval, a specialist in leadership skills training.

There was also time to experience life in the UK, with tours of St Paul's cathedral, a boat trip to Greenwich, visits to the British Museum, Oxford colleges and Chartwell (Churchill's home in the Kent countryside), invitations to home dinners and meals with the Iraqi Youth Forum, the Student Iraqi Medical Association and the Reverends Robert Stanier and Dr Rob Mayo.

2.6 PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

2.6.1 Northern Ireland

The delegation visited Belfast between 21 and 24 March to learn about the peace process in Northern Ireland and share their experiences of Iraq. Before they set off, they met with long-time residents of Northern Ireland Peter and Fiona Hannon, who described their personal experiences of developing cross-community relationships and working towards reconciliation.



Expertly hosted by Sheila McClelland and Pamela Carson of the External Liaison Unit of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the group met with prominent Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) (photo above), opinion makers, and community leaders from a wide variety of backgrounds.

They were welcomed to the Assembly by Speaker William Hay MLA (photo below). Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness MP MLA, Junior Minister Robin Newton MLA, and MLAs from different parties Jonathon Bell, Dolores Kelly, Danny Kennedy, Raymond McCartney and Dawn Purvis took time to share their perspectives and listen to the visitors. The Iraqi group were struck by an image given by Reverend Harold Good, an Independent Decommissioning Witness and former President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, of stepping stones across a river: in some cases, a small stone is essential to get from one big stone to another...



Welcomed to the Northern Ireland Assembly by Speaker William Hay MLA

They were taken to both Loyalist and Republican areas of the city. In north Belfast they met with Liam Maskey and colleagues at Intercomm, a cross-community initiative in working on long-term development projects. They also met Billy Hutchinson, a former UVF commander now engaged in community development on the Mount Vernon housing estate, who took the group on a visit to one of the “Peace Walls”.

In east Belfast, they were welcomed by Charter for Northern Ireland (photo right), formed by former UDA combatants Frankie Gallagher and Jackie MacDonald, who are now committed to sustaining peace through social and economic regeneration. They had invited former Irish Republican Army combatants to the meeting and together they explained how they had left violence behind to engage with their former enemies. They told of an occasion when they had worked together to defuse a potential flashpoint.



With Eamon Mallie (2nd left) and Mark Devenport (3rd left)

Depending on their professional backgrounds and future plans, each of the delegates had specific areas of interest, ranging from developing public health and higher education systems to improving media institutions and attracting overseas investment. During their trip, they were able to learn from the Northern Irish experience in each of these areas. Over dinner in the private dining room of the Assembly, there were conversations with Assistant Chief Constable Duncan McCausland of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Dr Jim Livingstone of the Department of Health and Trevor Killen from Invest Northern Ireland. Well-known journalists and commentators Eamon Mallie, Mark Devenport of the BBC (photo left) and Prof. Rick Wilford, of Queen’s University, also shared experiences and perspectives.

The stay concluded with a visit to the Northern Ireland Science Park, a business development centre, and a tour of the notorious Crumlin Road Gaol, now being redeveloped as a new city quarter featuring hotel, housing, sports and educational facilities.

2.6.2 UK Parliament

On 17 and 18 March, in the Houses of Parliament, the delegation met MPs and peers from across the political spectrum to discuss issues relating to Iraq and learn more about the workings of democracy in the UK.

In the House of Lords, they were hosted by the Duke of Montrose (Opposition spokesman on Scottish and Rural Affairs) who introduced them to Lord Ahmed of Rotherham, Baroness Rawlings (Opposition spokesperson on International Development) and Lord Cope of Berkeley. They were also welcomed by Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne MEP. Following a tour of Parliament, the delegation met Rt Hon John Battle MP in the House of Commons.

During these meetings, the group was able to convey a picture of day-to-day life in Iraq, the progress made in recent years and the major challenges that remain. British-Iraqi relations were frankly discussed, focusing on the need for more efficient visa administration, scholarships and partnerships with UK universities and training from UK companies working in Iraq.

Meeting with a range of parliamentarians enabled to the group to benefit from different perspectives on the British political system. From Lord Ahmed, they heard about the representation of religious and ethnic minorities in the UK. Baroness Rawlings and Lord Cope focused on international development, giving practical advice on the support that could be provided by bodies such as the British Council and the Department for International Development. Baroness Nicholson spoke from her perspective as a frequent visitor to Iraq as Executive Chair of the AMAR international charitable foundation. Finally, they heard from John Battle MP about the responsibilities of an MP and the particular challenges posed by representing a diverse urban constituency, Leeds West. Over the course of the two days, the delegation gained a real insight into the British political system, and commented that it fuelled their hopes for a workable democracy in Iraq.



With Rt Hon John Battle MP (3rd right) outside the Houses of Parliament

2.6.3 FCO and DFID

Having gained an understanding of the parliamentary system, the group then made visits to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development.

Meeting with Chris Bowers, Deputy Head, Middle East Group at the FCO (photo right), and members of the Iraq team at DfID, the group gave their views on the current political and security situation in Iraq, the obstacles to professional and economic development and their hopes and expectations for the future. They discussed the role of UK diplomatic and aid missions in Iraq and made suggestions for future development. In turn, the group developed a



better understanding of how the FCO and DfID operated in the UK, Iraq and around the world, the challenges they faced and their relationships with other UK and international bodies.

2.6.4 BBC

The delegation spent half a day at the BBC, as guests of BBC Arabic Television and Radio, and BBC Radio 4. They were hosted by World Service Editor Bassam Andari and Radio 4 Network Manager Denis Nowlan. In the BBC Arabic studios, the team was introduced to the station's multimedia output. They also met journalists to discuss the role of Arabic-language media in the west and in Iraq, and debate issues in Iraq that they felt should receive media attention. The entire team were interviewed on the BBC Arabic radio programme Extra.



At Radio 4, the team were given a tour of the studios and met Denis Nowlan and senior foreign reporter Hugh Sykes to discuss the role of Radio 4 in the life of the nation, its editorial policy on foreign reporting (and Iraq in particular) and the attempts of the BBC to provide balanced coverage of controversial issues.

Delegates were fascinated to speak to Hugh Sykes, who has reported extensively from Iraq, and welcomed his sympathetic approach to the problems facing the nation. However, they felt that the BBC should be careful to balance its coverage of violence and instability in Iraq with some “good news” stories about the country.

The team welcomed the opportunity to engage with journalists at such a high level and stressed the importance of developing a free media to the future of Iraq.

2.6.5 Oxford

During a one-day visit to Oxford, Nigel Biggar, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, engaged the visitors in a conversation on Dealing with the Past, and then gave them a tour of Christ Church College and Cathedral. In the college gardens, he showed them fig trees grown from seeds brought back from the Middle East and planted by the first Professor of Arabic at Oxford in the 1630s! During a brief tour of the University, they were accompanied by several students. In the evening, they attended a reception at the Oxford IofC centre. They gave a multimedia presentation on aspects of Iraq's history, culture and some of the problems facing young professionals in the country today, then engaged in informal conversations on religion, security and daily life in Iraq during a shared meal.

2.6.6 School visit

Towards the end of the programme, the team visited Kingston Grammar School at the invitation of Head of Third Year, Neil Mackay. The group very much enjoyed touring the school and attending the morning assembly where pupils performed short skits on topics such as internet safety, monitored by sixth form prefects. They then joined history and religious studies classes, where 14- to 18-year-old pupils were able to ask questions about the group's experiences in Iraq, life under the previous regime and recent

developments, as well as religious practices and the changing relationships between different ethnic communities. The group also had coffee with members of staff, who were in the midst of preparations for their annual football match with the students – unfortunately, they were not able to stay for the result!



2.6.7 Leadership training

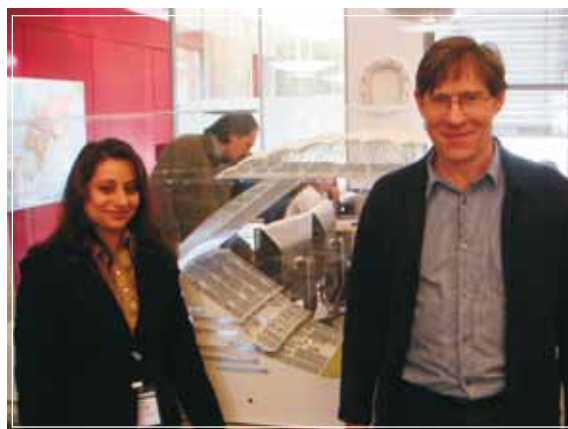
Formal training sessions were provided in leadership and communication skills, to complement the group's visits and personal exchanges. Workshops covered practical leadership qualities such as developing vision, team-building, proactivity, and strategic thinking on personal, community and professional levels. In further sessions on communication skills the group explored and practised approaches to



public speaking, listening skills, non-verbal and team communication. The participants were also supported in finding the best ways to present information and ideas about Iraq during the visits and receptions they attended.

2.6.8 Professional visits

Each team member spent one day shadowing and learning from professionals in their chosen field. The hosting organisations included Arup Sport (photo right), BBC Arabic, the Royal Free Hospital, King's College London and Thames Valley University. Apart from developing their professional skills, the delegation had the chance to develop contacts that will provide advice and support on their return to Iraq.



2.6.9 Public events

The programme included several public events – opportunities for the participants to share their experiences of Iraq and hopes for the future, and to practise the public speaking and teamwork skills they were developing in their daily training sessions.

On 15 March, BAX and KF Iraq arranged a panel discussion on Britain and Iraq: a tumultuous shared history at the London School of Economics at which the delegation were Guests of Honour. Speakers included Christopher Prentice CMG, a recent British ambassador to Iraq, Qais Hamza, an Iraqi economist, Nick Krohley, Teaching Fellow at

King’s College, London, Iraq analyst Ahmed Mehdi, and author and barrister James Mather. In front of an audience of 100, the panel drew out some of the consequences of the fraught relationship between Britain and Iraq, then engaged in a lively question-and-answer session with members of the audience and the Iraqi delegation. At the end a senior British-Iraqi said “At last we have spoken about the ‘elephant in the room’!”

The programme culminated in a formal reception at the London IofC centre on 30 March. A multimedia presentation was followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience at which the delegation gave frank views on the state of governance and security in Iraq. They also shared their experiences of the programme and described their vision for the future of their country and the difficult situations that awaited them on their return.



Thanks to these opportunities – together with the intensive training on communication and group work skills – the team commented that their confidence and competence in public speaking dramatically improved. The standard of the final presentation, in front of an audience including journalists, politicians and Middle East experts, was high and the group's insights were much appreciated by their audience.

3 FEEDBACK AND OUTCOMES

3.1 Comments from the delegation

Personal conclusions

"I learned how to be open-minded and how to communicate with different people."

"It gave me a wide network of contacts for my career and future projects."

"I smelled democracy and liberty in London's air."

Conclusions from experiences in Northern Ireland

"In Northern Ireland we saw a community even more divided than ours, but they did it [made peace]! It gives hope that we can too."

"I learned that the people of Northern Ireland want to live in peace and not war. They have exchanged the language of violence with a language of peace."

"We saw how people in Northern Ireland are trying to trust each other."

Vision for the future of Iraq

"I would like to see respect for law in Iraq, not fear of it."

"I envision proper health care for Iraqis."

"I dream of cultural understanding between Kurds and Arabs."

"I would like to see the development of honest and ethical practices."

Aims on return to Iraq

"I will help raise awareness about western countries, and help build bridges between the Middle East and the west."

"I learned that one small step can lead to bigger steps. [As a university lecturer] I will do some small steps, including training courses for lecturers, writing textbooks, collaboration between my department and companies to enhance student and teaching skills and create work opportunities."

"We will stay in touch and help each other expand our projects to make changes in our community."

"People can't fight for ever. Peace starts from your home, my home. I am responsible to rebuild Iraq. We will raise our country in this world."

4 FINANCIAL BASIS

BAX was responsible for the costs of the programme in Britain and Northern Ireland. Exceptionally, it also took responsibility for the cost of travel from and to Iraq as promised funding in Iraq did not materialise.

The planning and hosting was undertaken by BAX and KF Iraq volunteers. Five people provided round-the-clock hosting: Ronnie Graham, Rachel Aspden and Alison Baily used substantial amounts of annual leave, Juman Kubba made herself available for the entire duration of the visit, and Peter Riddell was seconded by Initiatives of Change. Judi Conner and Krish Raval gave their services as trainers. Numerous others contributed time and expertise in arranging and hosting programme items.

We express particular gratitude to BP Iraq and the Oxford Group Belfast for generous donations, to individual donors who prefer to remain anonymous, to Initiatives of Change for the use of facilities at its London headquarters, and for the contribution of members of its network in Britain and Northern Ireland.

As charities, BAX and KF Iraq invite donations from interested individuals, foundations and corporations to be able to continue this work. For further information, please see website details on back page.

5 CONCLUSION

Feedback from the organisations and individuals who hosted the team was extraordinarily positive. In particular, the audience for the final presentation – which included eminent political, development and media professionals – was highly impressed by the delegation’s professionalism and commitment to working for a better future in Iraq. As a result, many of the hosts and partners have expressed an eagerness to collaborate with BAX on any future programmes.

Over 250 British and Northern Irish people heard or met the group, and been given information about life in Iraq and their aspirations for the future. The public panel discussion on the history of British-Iraqi relations was innovative and informative, demonstrating a readiness to face controversial aspects of British history.

The delegation members also commented on the success of the programme. In addition to the insights they gained into aspects of British and Northern Irish society, team members remarked that their experiences would enable them to return to Iraq refreshed and inspired to create change in their professions and communities.

Over the course of the three-week programme many powerful personal stories were shared and new friendships formed. These moments underline the importance of creating a space for dialogue and reflection – both by facilitating productive encounters between British, Irish and Iraqis, and by providing the visitors with respite from the day-to-day pressures they face living and working in Iraq.

BAX and KF Iraq will maintain contact with the members of the delegation, and seek future opportunities to build trust between our peoples through such visits.

Report compiled and edited by **Rachel Aspden**.
Northern Ireland photos by the External Liaison Unit of the Northern Ireland Assembly.
Other photos by hosts and members of the delegation.
For further information: www.bax.org.uk – www.kfiraq.org