

# British-Arab Exchanges

***BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE:***  
**AN IRAQI-UK COLLABORATION**

**A report of the visit of  
Iraqi young professionals to the UK  
6-19 September 2008**



## INTRODUCTION

Six young professionals from Iraq visited the UK on a cultural exchange programme with a focus on leadership and community-building training. They were invited by British-Arab Exchanges (BAX) in partnership with the Iraqi Kubba Foundation.

The main purpose of the visit was to encourage trust and understanding between young Iraqis and their counterparts in the UK, to provide opportunities for the Iraqi delegates and their hosts to learn from each other's experiences, challenges and cultural heritages and to develop strategies and skills to support the work of reconstruction in Iraq now and in the years ahead.

## THE DELEGATION

The delegation was selected by personal recommendation and interview, on the basis of their interest in the objectives of the project. They were all in their twenties. Three were qualified medical doctors, one a teacher, one a microbiologist planning to become a politician, and one works as an interpreter. Three are from Baghdad, the others from Diwanyia, Hillah and Amara. The group was led by an official of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).

## THE HOSTS

**British-Arab Exchanges (BAX)** has more than 30 years' experience of arranging exchange visits, with the aim of building trust and respect between future decision-makers of the Arab countries and the West. Over these years BAX has arranged visits involving young people from Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Britain and other European countries. The project managers for BAX were Ronnie Graham, a lawyer, Dr Peter Rundell, a civil servant, and Judi Conner, an executive coach. They were supported by BAX committee members and other volunteers.

**The Kubba Foundation** is another non-profit, non-governmental organisation. It promotes the rebuilding of a strong and viable civil society in Iraq, and supports educational projects that directly benefit the people of Iraq, regardless of religion, ethnicity or background.

In the course of the programme, BAX and the Kubba Foundation were grateful for the support of **Initiatives of Change-Ireland**, and **Initiatives of Change-UK** which enabled the group to use its accommodation and meeting space in central London.

## THE PROGRAMME

The *Building for the Future* programme included four days in Northern Ireland, nine days in London and one day in Oxford. There were meetings with leaders in public and community life, hospitality in private homes, and visits to centres of cultural and social significance. There was also time for dialogue, reflection, training workshops and assignments geared to future strategies for their return home. In the spirit of exchange, the group had opportunities to speak about their own lives and experiences in Iraq, both at public gatherings and in personal encounters.

## PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS

### BELFAST

#### Stormont and Martin McGuinness, Deputy First Minister



The delegation was warmly welcomed at Stormont Castle by Martin McGuinness MLA, Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive (*photo: front row, centre*), and Gerry Kelly MLA, Junior Minister (*photo: back row 3<sup>rd</sup> from right*). Martin McGuinness, who has himself visited Iraq, spoke of the importance of moving as quickly as possible to the negotiating table to achieve a political solution and avoid loss of lives. He responded to questions from the visitors on how to break the cycle of violence, and how education can be used as a tool for progress in a society torn by conflict.

This was followed by a guided tour of the Stormont Assembly building, including a history of parliamentary politics in Northern Ireland.

#### Clonard Monastery

A visit was made to Clonard Monastery situated on the peace-line in Catholic West Belfast, where Programme Hosts Jim Lynn, a Roman Catholic (*photo: 3<sup>rd</sup> from right*), Alec McRitchie, a Protestant of the Presbyterian Church (*photo: far left*), and Dr Roddy Evans, a Protestant of the Church of Ireland, had met weekly through



the worst years of the conflict. The study of scripture together, they said, had opened their eyes to the way they were viewed by the other communities.

They described how, in the late 1980s, the priests of the Monastery hosted meetings at which John Hume, Leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Gerry Adams, Leader of Sinn Féin, agreed a common policy. The coordination of this policy with the Irish government was a significant step towards the 1998 Good Friday agreement between the UK and Ireland, which gave Northern Ireland the freedom to choose its own destiny and created a Legislative Assembly and a power-sharing executive.

### **The Peace Line**



The group visited one of the high walls which continue to separate the two communities in Belfast, and to places of remembrance commemorating those who lost their lives in the conflict. Over meals the group had opportunities to talk openly with Protestants and Catholics with practical involvement in the peace-building process.

### **Intercomm**

The group was also welcomed to the North Belfast offices of Intercomm by co-founder Liam Maskey (*photo: 2<sup>nd</sup> from right*), and staff members. Intercomm builds links between Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist communities through long-term development work, peace-building initiatives, and programmes for youth, women and job-creation.



Liam Maskey and his colleagues believe it is the people who have experienced the effects of conflict who are the key resource in transcending community division. He also told the visitors that, as Northern Ireland had received so much support from around the world, it was their duty to contribute their experience in other conflict situations.

A striking impression was made by two of Intercomm's project leaders who had formerly been combatants in opposing paramilitary groups, and who are now jointly running a programme to reduce tension between the two communities.

### **Interdenominational group**

A bible study group whose members are both Protestant and Catholic invited the Iraqis to their weekly gathering at a home in the Cadogan Park area of Belfast. An Irish doctor present had worked as a volunteer in Iraq, and topics of discussion included healthcare, politics and the arts in Iraq.

## DERRY

### Paddy Doherty and Dr Raymond McClean



The visitors met with Paddy Doherty (*photo: left*), known as 'Paddy Bogside' after the Catholic community he came to represent, and Dr Raymond McClean, former Mayor of Derry. Doherty told how the Inner City Trust, of which he had been Executive Director, had rebuilt many damaged buildings in the centre of Derry, while at the same time training unemployed young people in vocational skills. He challenged the visitors to take responsibility for putting right what is wrong.

### The Bogside Artists

A tour of outdoor murals on the gable-ends of houses in the Catholic/Nationalist Bogside area was led by Kevin Hasson (*photo: right*), one of the artists who painted them. The murals depict a community living through the horror of ever-present conflict and finally finding the resources to achieve and celebrate peace. Through these works, he recounted the history of the Bogside community in which he had grown up.



## LONDON

### Parliament



Jeremy Corbyn MP (*photo: left*) received the group and listened to their concerns. They presented him with a list of priorities for the development of Iraq and of British-Iraqi relations, focusing on the need for a British consulate in Iraq, an independent Iraqi anti-corruption watch-dog, attention to be paid to NGOs' concerns, and training and scholarships to be made available.

### Department for International Development

The group visited the Department for International Development at the invitation of Dr Peter Rundell and the Iraq Team. In response to questions, the visitors gave their views on the state of governance, administration and security in Iraq, on the scarcity of basic resources, and how these challenges can be met.

## The BBC

The group was shown round the new BBC Arabic TV channel by its Director, Hosam El-Sokkari (*photo: right*). They were able to ask questions about the BBC's editorial stance and its output, and then four of the group were interviewed about the current situation in Iraq. The interview was intended to be one short item in an hour-long programme, but the four were so interesting that the producer allowed them to fill the whole programme!



The group was also taken on a tour of the historic Broadcasting House by senior managers of BBC Radio Four.

## Study sessions

A half-day workshop on leadership skills was conducted by Krish Raval, a specialist in leadership skills training. Practical exercises were coupled with instruction and discussion on motivating a group, putting ideas into action, leading a team, obstacles to leading, qualities of leaders, and decision-making.

The group was given assignment work focusing on the learning experienced on the visit, and ways of applying this on their return to Iraq. They were supported in the preparation of an audio-visual presentation portraying the current realities in Iraq, the particular concerns of each group member about their country, and their vision for the future. This work was facilitated by executive coach Judi Conner.

A seminar on post-conflict reconstruction was led by BAX Secretary Peter Riddell with a colleague from Initiatives of Change. This was based on practical experiences of reconciliation in France and Germany after the Second World War, and between Moslems and Christians in northern Nigeria.

## Reception and Iraqi presentation

An evening reception was held for the Iraqis at the Initiatives of Change centre in London. The visitors gave their audio-visual presentation about contemporary Iraq and shared their personal experiences of the *Building for the Future* programme and their vision for the future. The audience included representatives of NGOs, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Iraqi Policy Group, journalists, British Iraqis, and supporters of BAX, the Kubba Foundation and Initiatives of Change. This was followed by a lively question and answer session, and discussions continued over a buffet supper timed for the breaking of the Ramadan fast.

In his presentation, one of the group said that what he had learnt in Northern Ireland and would take back to Iraq was the importance of forgiveness. As a teacher, he said he would on his return seek to divert children from conflict.

When asked what was needed to improve the future in Iraq, another replied that it was important that the right aid recipients were reached, and this could be achieved by greater consultation with people outside the Green Zone in Baghdad as to what the current needs are. Another added that Iraqi professionals need more support in tackling the difficulties they face, and there is a need for effective political leadership.

### Visits of cultural or professional interest

These included a conducted tour of Westminster Abbey with Dr Peter Rundell (*photo: left*), a visit to the Assyrian collection at the British Museum, watching the Changing of the Guard, a boat ride to the Tower of London, a trip on the London Eye and a matinee of the musical show *Stomp*. The medical doctors in the group visited the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine at the invitation of Dr James Carpenter, Reader in Statistics.



### Home visits

In the evenings the group was invited to supper in a variety of private homes. These included the home of a civil servant, a BBC journalist, and an Anglican minister. The latter, the Reverend Robert Stanier, addressed the group on spirituality in modern Britain, leading to a discussion comparing the role of faith in politics and the community in Britain and in Iraq.

### OXFORD



Councillor Susanna Pressel, Lord Mayor of Oxford (*photo: front, 4<sup>th</sup> from left*), welcomed the visitors and gave them a tour of the Town Hall. Councillor Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council (*photo: front, 3<sup>rd</sup> from left*), explained how local government works in Britain. Oxford graduate Jim Baynard-Smith (*photo: back, far right*), led the visitors on a tour of the University. In the evening the group gave their presentation to an invited audience.

## COMMENTS FROM THE VISITORS

*It's been a life-changing experience for me. This is the type of help Iraqis need, to expand our knowledge and horizons and to see what peace brings and how it can transform a nation if the will to change exists.*

*The programme made us as one team, although everyone has his own job, but we will work as a team, everyone from his own position. I can be a part of the change to build a good generation which looks forward.*

*I learnt a lot about the administrative system and leadership skills that I can take to my country. I will use the experience of seeing projects run by charities that are helping rebuild the community.*

*The visit to Northern Ireland was three days of hope! The most important thing I learnt is about forgiveness and how we could build the country by co-operating with each other and leaving the past. I will begin the change in myself, then confer with others and pass on the great meanings that I have been really happy to get – especially forgiveness, hope, cooperation and insistence on doing the right things. Before this visit I suffered from disappointment ....but now I feel that I am full of hope and energy to change the future.*

*I learnt that after conflict between people we must sit together and rebuild the country. And the important thing is that we must reach this point sooner. I will work to change the concepts that are controlling the mind-set of our people.*

*I have learnt about cooperation between societies and love towards other people. Everyone should do what he can from his position. Education is the key, and paying more attention to the coming generation.*

*I learned a lot from the Irish experience that can be adapted as a model to launch reconciliation and national dialogue among rivals in Iraq. A glorious future awaits my country provided that people of courage and wisdom work together.*



## THANKS AND CONCLUSION

The BAX National Committee expresses its sincere thanks to all those in Northern Ireland and England who gave so generously of their time, hospitality and money to make this visit possible.

BAX also thanks Dr Ali Kubba and the Kubba Foundation for proposing the idea, for selecting the participants and for financing their travel to Britain.

Finally, BAX hugely appreciates the visiting Iraqi delegates and their wholehearted contribution to the *Building for the Future* programme. Each one brought thought, energy and engagement to the project, and gave the wide range of people they met in the UK a deeper understanding of Iraq and the challenges Iraqis face.

This was a highly successful programme, as agreed by the delegates, British-Arab Exchanges, the Kubba Foundation, and all those who met the group. The programme fulfilled its purpose of building bridges between the UK and Iraq, and providing an opportunity for collaborative learning and practical strategising for the future.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

All parties concerned would like to see the programme develop. Looking ahead from this point there are a number of challenges to address if this is to happen.

These include finding:

- the financial means to support further visits
- practical ways to follow up the initial visit and support individual group members in carrying out the community-building initiatives they want to take
- ways to facilitate the issuing of visas. (In the absence of a UK visa agency in Iraq, the group had applied for visas online and travelled to Beirut for follow-up interviews at the British Consulate there. The process took a further ten days and would have taken longer but for Foreign Office intervention. This unexpected delay was very costly for the group and for the Kubba Foundation arranging the group's travel to London. It also meant that the first week of the group's programme had to be rescheduled.)
- volunteers to broaden and strengthen the core host team in the event of repeating such an intensive programme.

## **TRUSTEES**

Professor Roger Spooner OBE MA PhD BVetMed MRCVS (*Chairman*), Michael Maddox OBE (*Treasurer*), Peter Riddell BA ARCM (*Secretary*), Peter Rundell PhD FSS

## **NATIONAL COMMITTEE**

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*Photo on front cover: Visitors in gardens of Exeter College, Oxford University*  
*Photos: Peter Riddell and Judi Conner (except Northern Ireland Ministers)*