

Fulbright students from Iraq are in the United States for the first time since 1989.

Operation Iraqi Education

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq is certain to be debated in the upcoming presidential election and beyond. Many Americans question the legitimacy of the war, and others support the fall of Saddam Hussein. But a group of Iraqi Fulbright students and scholars at Indiana University have an entirely different perspective.

“As I have told many reporters, it’s not all about the military action; it’s about the building of our country,” says Barakat Kadhem Jassem, one of eight Iraqis who came to Indiana University in February for pre-academic training under the Fulbright foreign-student program.

by MIKE WRIGHT

The Fulbright program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, has provided study opportunities for both U.S. and foreign students in more than 150 countries since 1946. It is funded by an annual appropriation by Congress.

The IU group is among 25 Iraqi Fulbright grant winners, the first from their country to come to the United States since 1989, when the U.S. Fulbright program with Iraq was suspended. All 25 spent a week in Washington, D.C., in early February before splitting into four groups that headed to IU, the University of Arizona, the University of Oregon, and the University of California Santa Cruz. At the four institutions, the students and scholars undertook English and computer-skills training and learned the basics of their chosen fields of study.

Two members of the Fulbright group at IU are visiting senior scholars, both in their 50s. They were at IU until March 1 before moving to assignments at Ohio University and the University of Texas for research and further study. The six Fulbright students will work at IUB



through the summer before heading to master’s programs in public health, public administration, business, journalism, law, and English.

Arriving in Bloomington, the Iraqis experienced culture shock, but quickly settled into a social and academic life that was different from anything they could experience in their own country.

“I knew nothing about Bloomington or Indiana,” says Rawand Abdulkadir Darwesh, 28, of the northern Kurdish region of Iraq. “I was terrified, even for a few days when I got here. I was confused, not knowing what

GREAT EXPECTATIONS ■ Fulbright student Barakat Kadhem Jassem believes America has given Iraq a long-awaited chance at achieving democracy. Photo Tyagan Miller.

to do. But now, believe me, I love it as if I'm in my own city."

Dalia Qahraman Kaikhasraw, 25, who holds a degree in English language and literature from the University of Sulaymaniyah, says moving into an apartment, getting out to the shopping centers, mixing with other students, and finding familiar food in some Bloomington restaurants helped ease the transition.

"We found Falafels," she says, with a laugh, of the Bloomington restaurant that serves Middle Eastern fare. She adds that it also helps to keep in touch with friends back home via e-mail.

"One thing I've told my friends is that the university here is totally different," Kaikhasraw says. "You cannot see high walls, barbed wire that you used to have around our universities. Everybody asks for photos of IU."

Jassem says his Fulbright experience is an opportunity to reach out and build understanding between nations.

"We want to try to educate the American people about the situation back in Iraq," he says.

During the Saddam regime, that situation was bleak for most Iraqis, Jassem says. There were the privileged few who benefited under the Baath regime of Saddam, but Jassem says that for most Iraqis life was wrapped in a cocoon of dictatorship and tyranny, limited to the cares of survival each day. But he now sees hope for the future.

He says the outcome of the conflict is what is important, and calls for a constitution that is fair to all Iraqis, regardless of religion, sect, or race.

"That's what we expect from the



United States," he says. "Iraq is being given a historic chance to live in a democratic regime."

Although coalition forces continue to suffer casualties from bombings and suicide attacks — events that the Iraqi students say come from foreign terrorist elements — Iraq is in a period of transition after the fall of Saddam. Plans call for a transfer of political power to the Iraqis by July 1.

Darwesh says the U.S. and fellow coalition members must walk a fine line during that transition, but that they should not abandon the country suddenly.

"Any sudden pullout would be a

fatal mistake," he says. "Forces should remain in smaller sizes, because we don't have good neighbors in Iraq. That's why the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq is very important until Iraq is stable."

In addition to establishing a democratic constitution, security is very important to Iraq, the students say. Although service in the Iraqi army under Saddam was mandatory, Darwesh says the army should be re-established. An army in a free Iraq would help fight against terrorism, he says.

"The American army would be good to supervise it, but not to give orders, Darwesh says. "It is necessary for the psychology of the Iraqi people, who very much have self-dignity. They don't want to be persecuted; they want to live freely and happily, like in any other country.

"Of course, it is important that the new army be well paid and professional. Also, it is important for the senior officers to come back, because junior officers will not say 'my superior is an American.' They will say, 'he is an Iraqi.'"

Iraqis want security, and the U.S. assurance of it, especially in light of the Gulf War of the 1990s, when the coalition forces left after liberating Kuwait and Saddam remained in power, the students say.

The Iraqi students say people in their country wanted Saddam to fall, but feared reprisals if he survived again.

"Being an Iraqi Kurd, I am from the north," says Darwesh. "I witnessed thousands of our people killed. When American troops landed in our area this time, they were welcomed by the people. It was welcoming heroes coming to liberate the

WORLD WITHOUT WALLS ■ Dalia Qahraman Kaikhasraw says friends back home want to see pictures of IU. Photo Tyagan Miller.

people. But there were rumors that Saddam would strike the Kurdish areas again. That's why the people were very much afraid of reprisals."

Jassem adds poignantly, "I think Saddam being in power was a weapon of mass destruction in itself."

He says he wishes the media would focus more on the rebuilding efforts in Iraq rather than simply report the daily death tolls. It is time now, he says, to look forward.

"Everyday, everything I read is about how many people are killed," he says. "I feel very sorry about the killings, but it is the only way to get your freedom. There are 25 million Iraqi people and they are living, they are communicating, they are trying to do something better."

Darwesh adds that the resumption of educational programs, like the Fulbright exchange, is an important bridge to understanding between the people of Iraq and the U.S.

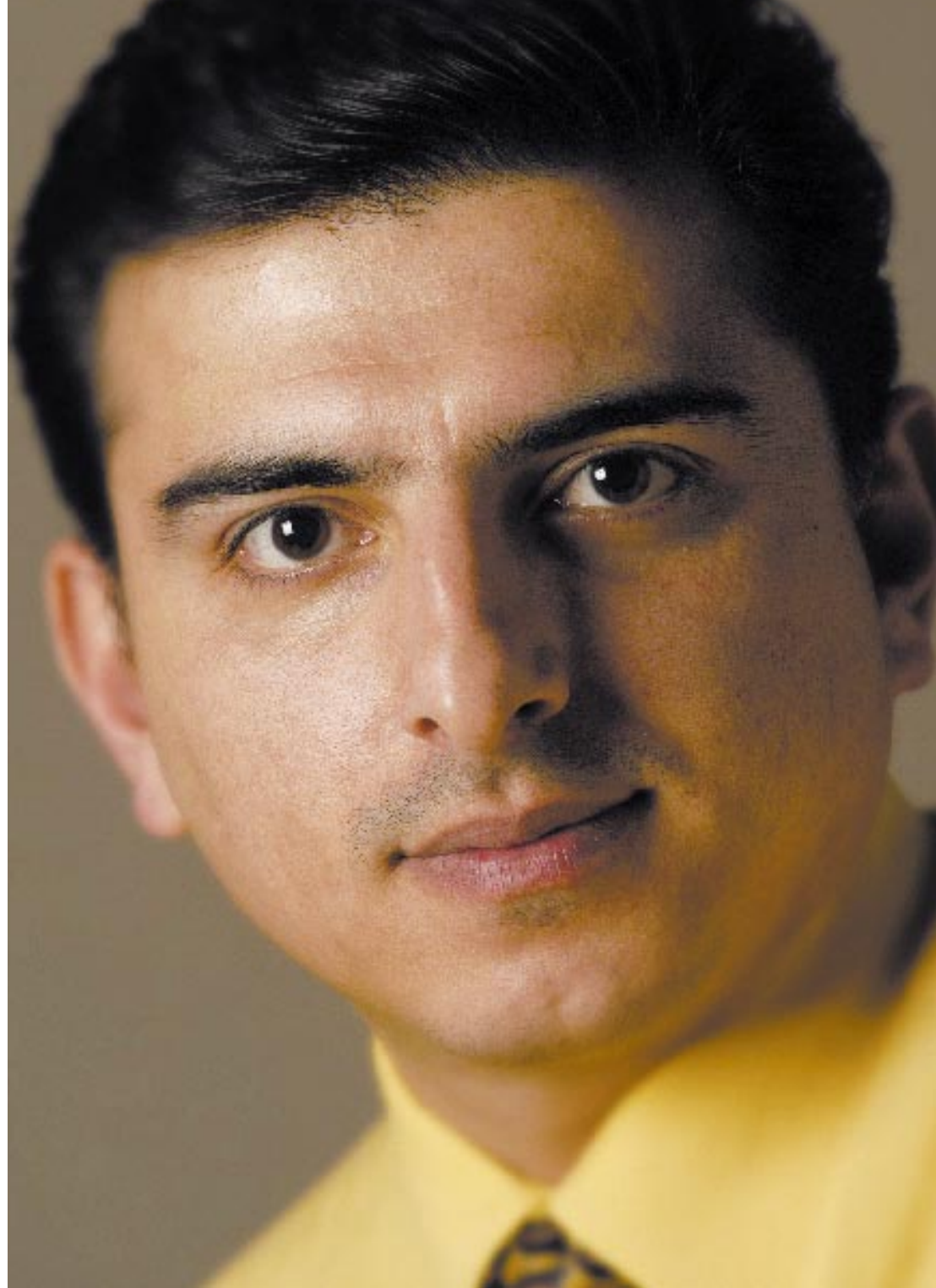
"We are meeting many, many people, and I'm telling them what Iraq looks like, not how Iraq was conveyed to them by media sources," Darwesh says. "This bridge of understanding is very important, so that's why I would like very much to thank the government of the United States and the State Department for allowing us to come."

"We hope that in Iraq in the future we will receive Americans and we can help them when they come to our country."

When he returns to Iraq, Darwesh says he hopes to participate in the reconstruction efforts. He has served as head of the English News Department for Kurdistan Television and wants to go back to work in public affairs and mass media, or possibly in the Iraq foreign service.

"You don't have a ministry of media here," he says. "This freedom in the United States is not available in many other parts of the world."

"That's why I hope to learn



THANKFUL ■ Rawand Abdulkadir Darwesh, who witnessed atrocities in the northern Kurdish region of Iraq, says the Kurds welcomed American troops as liberators. Photo Tyagan Miller.

much about this democracy and try my best to teach others and try to benefit from it."

Kaikhawraw plans to work or teach in the field of administration. She has worked for the United Nations the past three years and had done translation work for television stations before that.

Jassem, 25, of Baghdad, holds an English degree from Mustansiriyah University. He has worked as

a movie translator for the Iraqi National Television station and for the Coalition Provisional Authority and Ministry of Youth & Sport. He aspires to pursue academic work in American studies and would like to teach at the undergraduate level. ❧

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