Middle East Libraries in Focus

Hamayoun Ghafoori and Rania Azad

Introduction

While I was the director of the campus library at Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) in Doha, I fielded various questions about my experience. I tried answering questions with a tight “elevator speech,” a summary of my experiences brief enough to deliver during a short elevator ride. About 20 seconds in, however, the listener’s eyes would glaze over because I was not providing a hoped-for juicy or tantalizing answer. Instead, I often answered with something innocuous like “I like it” or lighthearted like “It is easy to travel to anywhere from there.” Any brief answer was inadequate to describe fully the experience and how it transformed me professionally and personally.

Among such questions as “Do you need to cover your hair?” and “Can you go in public alone?” three questions gave me pause. They were inquiries along the lines of “Are you scared to be in the Middle East?” “Are you isolated professionally?” and “You are doing noble and brave work, aren’t you?” My answers were simply “no,” but my experience was not universal to the Middle East. When asked that type of question, I wondered about colleagues at other American-style universities different from NU-Q and the other institutions in Education City. The library colleagues I thought of, though I did not know them personally, worked at two universities, the American University of Afghanistan and the American University in Iraq Sulaimani. These are American-style, American-curriculum universities in the Middle East not affiliated with a home campus in the United States. These universities operate in places of greater security risk, in countries racked by war and economic difficulties. They lack a 160-year-old home campus and library like Northwestern’s upon which to rely. Although we all had campuses founded in the first decade of the 2000s, these librarians had to start from scratch without helpful colleagues and without support from a home campus. I also wondered if they lacked a natural academic library community such as we had in Qatar’s cohesive Education City, the campus on the outskirts of Doha that hosts many educational and research organizations, including branch campuses of six American universities. Their
positions, I presumed, would more likely be professionally isolated and pioneering. I admired them without knowing them.

Now, two years later, I have reached out to these librarians and am learning about them, their institutions, and their libraries. Hamayoun Ghafoori is the assistant director of the American University of Afghanistan Library in Kabul, and Rania Azad is the manager of the Moulakis Library at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani. They wrote about their experiences based on questions I asked. What they describe will be familiar to many of us in academic and research libraries yet also very different in some respects, with challenges that we cannot imagine. They made me think, “No matter how bad my day is, I’m not diverting my budget to fight ISIS, and my campus doesn’t close physically due to a terror attack.” I hope you appreciate learning about them and their institutions as I have, which has broadened my understanding. Here are their stories.

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**American University of Afghanistan (AUAF)**

In Afghanistan, some people may not be impressed when told that you work in a library, but I find it a very interesting field, and I am proud of working in a library. I had little library training before 2006, when I was hired to work in the Afghan Parliament Library by the Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Project, a United States-funded effort to establish a strong, effective Afghan parliament. The Parliament Library was an organized, neat facility with Internet and computer facilities. I was the only staff member who understood English. Knowing English and having access to the Internet helped me improve my library knowledge. I started doing research on how modern libraries operate. I strengthened my network with other librarians in Asia, Europe, and the United States by posting my questions in groups, contacting librarians, and subscribing to different electronic mailing lists.

At the time, the Parliament Library lacked a good cataloging system, so I found it more important to work on cataloging than some other tasks. After a year, when the Parliamentary Assistance Project ended, I took a position in the Afghan government for three months. In August 2008, I got my desired job in the library of the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) in Kabul. I started work as a library assistant and was promoted to library cataloger and technical services officer and finally to assistant director. I served as acting director from June 2016 until September 2017.

Afghan Minister of Higher Education Sharif Fayez founded the American University of Afghanistan in 2004 and served as its first director. The university is modeled on American curriculum and standards. In August 2006, the university admitted its first group of 53 students to the Foundation Study Program, designed to strengthen the
English-language proficiency and study skills of high school graduates to prepare them for college. In 2013, the university opened the International Center for Afghan Women’s Economic Development. The center, funded by the U.S. Department of Defense, provides facilities for Afghan businesswomen to learn entrepreneurial and business skills and to network with one another. AUAF held its first graduation ceremony in 2010, granting bachelor’s degrees to 17 students.

Currently, AUAF offers undergraduate degrees in business administration, law, information technology, and political science, and two master’s degrees in business administration and art. AUAF has grown significantly. It enrolled 703 full-time students in the fall of 2017 (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In August 2016, AUAF faced two challenges to its operations and future. On August 7, the Taliban kidnapped two university professors, an American and an Australian, at gunpoint. On August 24, during evening classes, terrorists attacked the university with a car bomb and automatic gunfire. Sixteen people lost their lives, including seven students, one professor, and four university guards. At least 50 other people were wounded.

The campus closed for repairs for seven months. However, the university and its students did not give up. The university stood strong with the slogan “Education will prevail.” AUAF held its fall 2016 semester online. Most library services continued and were provided through e-mail and by telephone. The university reopened in March 2017.

Sadly, the two professors continued to be held hostage when this article went to press.

The mission of AUAF Library is to support the instructional and research needs of the AUAF community. Like academic libraries in the United States, our library is used for teaching and learning. The library provides instruction in searching, research methods, and information literacy through scheduled library classes and, when requested, curriculum support. Moreover, it offers reference and research support services to all members of the AUAF community. The library has effective partnerships within the campus community, with outside academic institutions, and with library organizations to enhance library resources and services.
AUAF Library has two branches. One is the Bernice Nachman Marlowe Library on the West Campus. The Marlowe Library supports students in the master of arts program and the Professional Development Institute, which offers certification in such professional fields as accounting, business administration, and information technology. The second branch is the Laura Bush Library and Resource Center on the International Campus. This library, temporarily housed in a classroom, serves undergraduate and graduate business students. The plan for next year is to move the Laura Bush Library into a new space that is already designated but requires the building of partitions and the purchase of furniture.

AUAF Library’s primary patrons are the university’s faculty, students, and staff. Members of the community and family members of university staff can use the library if they live inside the university campus. One characteristic that sets our university apart from many universities elsewhere is that most classes are taught after 5 p.m. because most students hold full-time jobs during the day. All our students are local Afghans, and one of their initial priorities is to improve their English. Thus, we have high circulation rates for books on English vocabulary, grammar, and usage.

Generally speaking, the materials in public and private libraries are subject to review for censorship by the government of Afghanistan. Fortunately, our materials have not been reviewed up to this time. Unlike other libraries in the country, AUAF Library opposes censorship. We have a policy and procedure in case our patrons challenge any materials held in the library. When an item is challenged, the person making the objection completes a form describing the reason for questioning the item and providing details about it. The item and form then go to the advisory Library Committee, which makes the final decision about the item.

AUAF Library purchases its materials from outside Afghanistan. Because of the weak and outdated mail system in the country, the library uses the German company DHL Express for shipping. It costs us more to receive books than many libraries in the United States.

Textbook distribution is another major activity that sets our library and university apart from those in the United States. At AUAF, the university acquires textbooks for the students. Getting the books on time is sometimes difficult and expensive. The library distributes textbooks at the start of semester and gets them back at the end of the semester.

I am pleased to say that AUAF Library is one of the foremost libraries in the country. All its resources are cataloged and searchable online. Patrons can use the databases off-campus for their research. The library uses Koha, an open-source library management system, for cataloging, circulation, reporting, and serials control. AUAF Library operates from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

American University of Afghanistan is a prestigious and famous institution in Afghanistan and in the region. When people discover that I work for AUAF, they ask many questions. The most common questions are about the programs we teach, the selection process, requirements for admission, scholarships, fees, and the qualifications of the professors who teach at AUAF.

AUAF Library became a member of the American International Consortium of Academic Libraries (AMICAL) in 2010. AMICAL works to help improve the libraries of member institutions through professional development, shared resources, and negoti-
ated pricing of resources. Along with these, AUAF Library participates in the AMICAL yearly conference and networks with member institutions in the consortium. AUAF Library also has a strong connection with other libraries in the country, including the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University, the Kabul Public Library, and the Kabul University Library. AUAF Library has played a model role in the country. It is one of the best libraries in term of resources, facility, integrated library systems, and professional staff. On numerous occasions, other libraries contact us for consulting and to train their staff.

Since its establishment, the library has maintained a good relationship with such vendors as EBSCO, Ithaka, The Economist, and ProQuest in providing academic resources to the AUAF community. Koha, the library management system, is provided, hosted, and supported by LibLime. In addition, the library uses other tools, such as OCLC Connexion to create bibliographic records and the U.S. Library of Congress Classification Web for cataloging. These vendors have played a key role in standardizing, modernizing, and providing online resources to our library.

Furthermore, the library is working on cataloging students’ theses, faculty articles, and research so they can be accessible to patrons. The university plans to offer more degrees in coming years, and accordingly, the library is expanding its collection to fulfill the needs of future students and faculty.

**American University of Iraq Sulaimani (AUIS)**

My path to library manager is an interesting one. I was born in Algeria and hold a master’s degree in computer science from the University of Science and Technology of Oran in Algeria. My Kurdish family is from Sulaimani City, but my father fled from Saddam Hussein’s regime in 1979 and settled in Oran. In 2013, I relocated to Sulaimani City to serve my country and to begin my professional career. The American University of Iraq offered an excellent opportunity to join the library as access service manager, and I was soon promoted to library manager upon the departure of the former director when I, along with some student workers, took on all library responsibilities.

The American University of Iraq Sulaimani (AUIS), established in 2007, is an independent, nonprofit university dedicated to excellence in learning, teaching, and research. Its comprehensive liberal arts education develops leaders who make a difference in Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, and the wider region. Reflecting Sulaimani’s location at an international crossroads, the university’s 1,600 students and 240 faculty and staff include such ethnic groups as Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and such religious groups as Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, Yazidis, and Christians. They all live and study together in a culture that fosters critical thinking, tolerance, and community involvement. This is unique to the region and likely the world. Academic freedom is a principle guaranteed at AUIS in a manner identical to that at colleges and universities in the United States. AUIS is the only private university fully recognized by the Republic of Iraq’s Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and also recognized and registered by Kurdistan Regional Government’s Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The academic programs, taught in English by international faculty members, are designed to meet or exceed standards set by regional accreditation organizations in the United States.
The library at AUIS plays a vital role in connecting students, faculty, and scholars across the university. AUIS Library currently ranks first in the Kurdistan Region, with excellent English-language research capabilities for students. The library’s mission is to provide the highest quality information and resources to support the research activities of students and faculty by integrating information fluency into the curriculum. As library manager, my goal is to help realize that mission.

The library was recently renamed the Moulakis Library to honor Athanasios Moulakis, who passed away in August 2015. He was the AUIS president from 2010 to 2013 and a member of the Board of Directors of the American University of Iraq Foundation (AUIF) in the United States.

The Moulakis Library’s collections of print and electronic resources support the teaching and research activities of the university. The print collection, which is developed collaboratively with the faculty, consists of around 11,000 books in English, Arabic, and Kurdish, along with multidisciplinary electronic journals such as EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ebrary, and others that cover all disciplines taught at AUIS. Receiving print books can be expensive due to shipping costs from Europe and the United States.

The Moulakis Library provides textbooks to students, maintains computers and printers for student and faculty use, and offers a reading and writing center and associated services. A new pilot project has been established to provide Kindles to encourage students to read and to increase the availability of books through the library. The library offers a variety of instruction sessions that include walk-in classes, face-to-face sessions with students, curriculum-integrated sessions, workshops, games, and online learning modules to support the development of students’ information and digital literacy.

The library is mostly restricted to the AUIS community (staff, faculty, and students) but is also open to faculty and doctoral students of other universities in the region. Most of the patrons are students from the undergraduate program and the Academic Preparatory Program, which teaches English-language skills and techniques for student success (see Table 2).

The Moulakis Library has faced several challenges. Since 2014, the Kurdistan Region has suffered a severe economic crisis along with a fight against the militant group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), which affects the university and its operations. The library had to concede part of its budget to help the university survive in such a difficult situation. The budget cutting impacted the purchase of online databases, renewal of subscriptions, and ordering of needed books to continue the development of the library. Furthermore, ordering books from the United States or Europe is costly due to the location of Iraq and the expensive cost of shipping. Another challenge is to make good use of the library’s space in terms of seats and number of computers while being mindful of the budget limitations. Finally, due to a small librarian staff, the library could not continue developing some library research assistance materials and guides, which are essential to library operations. Despite these challenges, the library has achievements about which to be proud, including upgrading to the latest version the Koha library management system and fully integrating it with RFID (radio frequency identification); reactivating a university-level reading club; and offering new digital services such as Kindles. Recently, the Moulakis Library was ranked first in the Kurdistan Region among all private university libraries, with excellent English-language research capabilities for students, online collections, and databases.
The AMICAL consortium is a great support that connects the library to other libraries so that it can benefit from their experience and information sharing. Additionally, attending the AMICAL annual conference is useful. Recently, I was awarded a small grant to receive peer training at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon for teaching information literacy. This will be a valuable skill to bring back to the community through the library and its work. Having a library manager more knowledgeable about information literacy enables us to teach our students how to best to find, evaluate, and use the information they need to accomplish their assignments and research papers.

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Rania Azad is the manager of the Moulakis Library at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani and an assistant lecturer at Sulaimani Polytechnic University; she may be reached at: rania.azad@auis.edu.krd or rania.azad@spu.edu.iq.

### Table 2.
Checkouts and check-ins at Moulakis Library, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User group</th>
<th>Percentage of checkouts/check-ins</th>
<th>Materials commonly used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate students</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Textbooks, literature, and novels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in the Academic Preparatory Program (APP)*</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>TOEFL® (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and APP books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and staff</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Reference and research materials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The Academic Preparatory Program teaches English-language skills and techniques for student success.