Empirical Article

Faculty Experiences of Higher Education Internationalization in Post-conflict Iraq and Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT

As Iraq and Tajikistan recover from the impact of conflict and international isolation, spaces are being created for higher education to internationalize by opening up and (re)connecting with the international academic community. Drawing on 25 field-based interviews, this article examines how academics in these two countries interpret these processes of higher education internationalization. Four main themes emerged: bridging the gap created by conflict, reconnecting with the world, importing prestige, and integrating into the international academic community. Most respondents viewed internationalization processes positively even while recognizing that national political and economic factors are constraining how these processes develop.

INTRODUCTION

War and organized violence continue to afflict countries around the world, with 52 active state-based armed conflicts and 76 non-state conflicts recorded in 2018. Despite a decrease in the amount of recorded violence at the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been growth in both the number and complexity of these conflicts (Pettersson et al., 2019). In cases where conflict has been brought to an end, education has been shown to be "critical to reconstruction" (Johnson & Hoba, 2015, p. 119) with wide-ranging

potential to support the post-conflict recovery of states, from teaching about peace and fostering social cohesion to engaging with international partners and supporting system rebuilding (Milton, 2018). The act of conflict and the ensuing post-conflict period can be viewed as a critical juncture offering "opportunities for positive transformation of education systems" (Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008, p. 482).

This article compares the cases of Iraq and Tajikistan as a sample of two societies that have experienced significant change as a result of recent conflict, and which have since begun to make reforms in higher education. In Iraq, the fall of the authoritarian one-party regime after the 2003 US-led invasion appeared to mark the beginning of a transition to a democratic society but gave way to a disastrous sectarian conflict. In Tajikistan, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created the conditions that led to a vicious civil war between 1992 and 1997 as well as near total economic collapse. As these two states recover from the impact of conflict and international isolation, spaces have been created for higher education to internationalize by opening up and (re)connecting with the now highly globalized international academic community. These parallel processes and activities of internationalization justify the comparison of post-conflict Iraq and Tajikistan. The comparison of these two countries, which have been relatively absent in English language studies on higher education, is further warranted by similar chronologies in the development of their higher education systems during the twentieth century and the timing of their conflicts.

Despite the significance of internationalization in contemporary global higher education, it has rarely been studied in the context of post-conflict settings, and the studies that do exist have been dominated by practice (Maringe et al., 2013). Previous studies of post-conflict higher education have substantially advanced understanding of how higher education is affected by conflict, for example discussing the potential

contribution of higher education in post-conflict reconstruction, state building and peacebuilding (Milton & Barakat, 2016) and how to rebuild higher education in post-conflict affected society (Babyesiza, 2012; Johnson & Hoba, 2015). However, less attention has been given to the role of internationalization in reforming higher education systems in post-conflict settings and to the lived experiences of those working at the frontline of changing higher education contexts.

This paper therefore aims to fill a gap in the literature about the internationalization of higher education in post-conflict settings from micro-level (faculty) perspectives, recognizing the importance of the international dimensions of higher education in assisting with the process of rebuilding higher education systems and institutions in the aftermath of violent conflict (Heleta, 2017). As internationalization is interpreted differently across actors, cultures and political settings (Knight, 2007), the study addresses the following research question in the context of Iraq and Tajikistan: How are processes of higher education internationalization interpreted by faculty in post-conflict settings?

The next section provides a definition of internationalization as it is unfolding in Iraq and Tajikistan. The conceptual framework developed for this study brings contextual factors (pre-conflict history and conflict as a critical juncture) to the fore. After discussion of the methods, the findings of the interviews undertaken for this study are

presented under four headings. These are broad and inclusive themes that emerged from the interviews: reconnecting with the international academic community, opportunities and challenges of student and faculty mobility, exploring international research collaborations, and importing prestige through branch campuses and joint programs. This study contributes to research on higher education internationalization by extending the analysis to post-conflict settings and by engaging with educational norms and structures that are brought forward from the pre-conflict period.

HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALIZATION IN IRAQ AND TAJIKISTAN

The internationalization of higher education is by no means a new phenomenon, but there is agreement that the scale and scope of internationalization activities have been amplified in recent decades (De Wit, 2002). A common definition of internationalization is "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11), incorporating goals such as improving quality, building capacity, enhancing students' competencies, and creating a culture that promotes and supports international and intercultural understanding. Internationalization processes in higher education have traditionally been motivated by economic, political, academic, socio-cultural, and reputational rationales (De Wit, 2002; Knight, 2004). Some emerging voices have also flagged the social responsibility of internationalization and how it can contribute to rebuilding in post-conflict situations (De Wit et al., 2017).

Contemporary higher education internationalization has rapidly diffused around the world (Buckner, 2019) and has been similarly understood in conceptual and programmatic terms across a very wide diversity of global settings (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019). This can be seen in the highly compatible definitions of internationalization activities in the ostensibly divergent Arabic and Russian language worlds applicable to Iraq and Tajikistan. In the Arabic language literature, internationalization is defined as a "long term strategy for establishing external relationships and links, for students' mobility, professional development of faculty members, curriculum innovation and modernization, and support for research projects" (Khater, 2015, p. 230). In the Russophone academic space still shared by Tajikistan, internationalization is similarly defined as greater interaction with foreign colleagues, student and faculty mobility, internationalization of the curriculum, creation of joint programs, and hosting international students (Forrat, 2009).

In Iraq, the 2011-2020 National Strategy for Education and Higher Education set out a comprehensive reform plan including the section, Going Global, with seven goals that include adopting a culture of internationalization, increasing international students and faculty, expanding partnerships and joint research with international universities, and opening international branch campuses (Government of Iraq, 2012). The 2018-2022 Government Program to reform higher education institutions in Iraq has set developing twinning programs with reputed international universities and encouraging private local and international investment in higher education as key internationalization goals (MHESR, n.d.). Tajikistan's National Education Development Strategy governs the

country's vision for the whole education system. The 2012-20 strategy set out the ambitions for "[t]he entry of Tajikistan into the international community, signing international conventions and acts, integration into the world education system, exchange of students and faculty, recognition of degrees and many other tasks connected with teaching and training students and researchers, have opened a path to wide international cooperation, which should be developed in all directions" (Government of Tajikistan, 2012, p. 8).

Studies of higher education internationalization in post-conflict Iraq and Tajikistan are scarce. In Iraq, Mohamed (2012) found that the internationalization concept is not widely understood among academics, noting that Iraqi universities have limited relations with international institutions through signed agreements because of political influence. Nevertheless, some universities were able to develop partnerships with international universities for the benefit of postgraduate researchers. Similarly, Ahmad (2014) found that the key factors in internationalization in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq at the government level are investing in human resources and research infrastructure, innovation, and creativity in the curriculum. Ahmad argues that the 2003 invasion "in a sense was a gate for paving the path for internationalization and bringing new technology to the country" (Ahmad, 2014, p. 35). However, institutional level interest in internationalization is still unclear, particularly because the implementation of internationalization in public universities is regulated by government policies and there are limited resources available for them to invest in international partnerships and collaboration.

In their review of higher education reform in Tajikistan, DeYoung et al. note that when internationalization processes began, they were "taking place according to the Bologna Process" (DeYoung et al, 2018, p. 382), a European program for harmonization of higher education that has spread far beyond the European Union's borders (Hartmann, 2008) and which has also played a pivotal role in higher education internationalization across the former Soviet space (Soltys, 2015). Two of the most common forms of internationalization programs in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia have been student/staff mobility programs and joint universities (Merrill, 2020). However, Merrill has also noted that "Tajikistan… has neither the financial wherewithal nor the infrastructure to focus on substantial higher education reforms" (Merrill, 2011, p. 161).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework developed for this study supports the interpretation, analysis, and comparison of the internationalization of higher education in the post-conflict settings of Iraq and Tajikistan by focussing on educational reforms in conflict impacted societies in which pre-conflict histories, conflict, and post-conflict challenges are inter-related. Two key notions supporting the framework are path dependency and critical juncture.

Pre-conflict History

The conceptual framework underscores the criticality of the settings' historical paths and the importance of contextual factors (Crossley, 2010), both to map the

institutional structure in Iraq and Tajikistan as well as to understand current reforms and trajectories. The notion of path dependency suggests "that the institutional legacies of the past limit the range of current possibilities and/or options in institutional innovation" (Hausner et al., 1995, p. 6). The weight of history means that even following periods of major change such as conflict, organizations and structures retain similarities with or return to their pre-major change configuration (Steinmo, 2008). However, while history may be a powerful predictor of future action, it is nevertheless possible to change the direction of a path, particularly if change comes about abruptly at a point of critical juncture (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007).

Prior to their recent conflicts, Iraq and Tajikistan shared rich and extensive histories of higher learning and discovery. The court at Baghdad (Iraq) and centres of academic excellence across Central Asia attracted "brilliant figures" in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, "one of the most astonishing periods of scholarship in history" (Frankopan, 2015, p. 97). Patterns of mobility within the Islamic world are ancient, with mediaeval scholarly hubs such as Baghdad attracting scholars and students from many parts of the world (Welch, 2012). Scholarship continued to flourish in what is now Tajikistan during the golden era of Islamic philosophy and science in the ninth to eleventh centuries CE (Achrorova, 2007).

In the case of Iraq and Tajikistan, the pre-conflict history of higher education places particular attention on developments of the twentieth century. It was during this period that both systems were institutionalized, which this has subsequently provided the basis for the reconstruction of higher education after conflict. Iraq's higher education sector thrived in the 1960s and 1970s. Its universities and technical institutions were highly regarded among other Arab states, attracting many international students from the region. Iraqi higher education played an important role in developing the nation's workforce and economy through its 19 universities, 9 technical colleges, 38 technical institutes as well as several research centers (Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2016). As a republic of the Soviet Union for much of the twentieth century, this was also a formative period for Tajikistan. A formal structure for higher education was established for the first time (Krasheninnikov & Nechaev, 1990), with the country's first higher education institution opening in 1931. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan had 10 higher education institutions and an Academy of Sciences representing a population of five million (DeYoung et al., 2018). Teaching and research in the Soviet era were largely separated, a legacy that continues to impact research capacity in contemporary Tajikistan (Sabzalieva, 2022).

Conflict As a Critical Juncture

The critical juncture in this conceptual framework is the conflict itself, and this dimension of the conceptual framework emphasizes the potential for reform in education that opens with the cessation of conflict. The post-conflict literature is replete with examples of the potential contributions of higher education in the aftermath of contemporary conflicts, to, for example, stabilizing the institutional framework, reconstruction, and peacebuilding (Heleta, 2017; Johnson, 2013). This paper builds on these works, in particular the smaller number of studies examining higher education

reforms that stem from conflict or occur in post-conflict settings (Babyesiza, 2012; Milton & Barakat, 2016).

The decline of Iraqi higher education began with the Iraq-Iran war (1981–1988) and continued during brutal economic sanctions (1991–2003). Both events resulted in significant destruction to the higher education infrastructure, quality and reputation of the system, and unprecedented brain drain. The further development of higher education was put on hold with the onset of conflict, which was stimulated by the US-led invasion in 2003. While it was assumed that the fall of the authoritarian one-party regime would lead to a democratic transition, it instead led to a period of sectarian conflict within the country, pervading all aspects of Iraqis' lives. The conflict escalated between 2006 and 2008, leading to the displacement of almost 1.6 million people during this period alone (IDP Working Group, 2008). Many cities in Iraq witnessed unchecked looting of state institutions, including universities, research centers, museums, and libraries, followed by the terrors of sectarian violence (Milton & Barakat, 2016). The politicization of higher education intensified following the De-Baathisation policy after 2003 that removed all qualified and experienced academics and administrative staff who had links with the previous regime, creating a vacuum for relevant skills to reform and manage higher education (Harb, 2008).

A decade earlier in Tajikistan, a lesser known but vicious civil war fought periodically between 1992 and 1997 was the fall-out of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The civil war displaced around 700,000 people – nearly one in six citizens – and almost 85,000 people were killed (Olimov, 2016). The civil war has had a "strong negative and lasting effect" on educational attainment (Shemyakina, 2011, p. 3), at least in part because of the "severely reduced capacity of the central government" during the conflict (Whitsel, 2009, p. 34). With the eruption of conflict, the pace of out-migration hastened among Russians and other ethnic minorities in Tajikistan who had traditionally been over-represented in Soviet academia (Rahmonova-Schwarz, 2010). Conflict in Tajikistan disrupted the transition that had only just begun away from the centralized Soviet system, leading to a total hiatus in areas such as faculty professional development (Ministry of Education et al., 2005). The ability of the system to grow and diversify during the conflict was severely challenged during the war (DeYoung et al., 2018). While peace has been successfully maintained since the end of the civil war, the increasingly authoritarian government – led by the same President since 1992 – has systematically closed spaces for political and social diversity, deliberately exploiting and perpetuating widespread fear of a return to conflict.

In both Iraq and Tajikistan, conflict thus served as a critical juncture. Once the conflict had ended, it opened up the potential for reform in higher education. At the point that conflict ceased, both countries brought forward a legacy from the previous regimes wherein higher education was highly centralized in governance, funding, and organization, having been used as a tool by the state to achieve its economic and political agendas (DeYoung et al., 2018; Harb, 2008). As in other post-conflict settings, the current environment in Iraq is characterized by instability, sectarian divide, corruption, economic uncertainty, and a fragile state (Milton, 2018). The higher education systems in both countries experienced a range of challenges as a result of conflict, including the

immediate need to address physical damage. Reconstruction was particularly urgent in Iraq, where it was estimated that 84% of the higher education institution infrastructure was burnt, looted, or severely destroyed in some form (Milton & Barakat, 2016). As a result of the critical juncture of conflict, Iraq and Tajikistan's higher education systems began to internationalize somewhat later than in other settings; internationalization processes are further differentiated by the complexity of the context that affects how internationalization is interpreted, implemented, and adopted.

METHODS

This comparative study pays attention to the way that internationalization is understood and practiced at the micro (individual) level, with empirical data coming from in-depth field interviews with experienced faculty members in Iraq and Tajikistan. Both authors have extensive experience in the respective higher education system, which helped to understand the contextual nature of higher education in each country as well as to recruit respondents for this study. The interviews with faculty provided rich information and first-hand experience of internationalization of higher education in both countries, helping to compensate for the lack of existing literature on this topic.

In total, 13 interviews in four public universities were completed in Iraq and 13 interviews were undertaken with respondents based in six public universities and the Academy of Sciences in Tajikistan during the second half of 2017. In the case of Iraq, three respondents were female and ten were male with teaching experience in public higher education ranging from 10 years to over 20 years. In Tajikistan, the sample consisted of six female and seven male respondents. Most participants were extremely experienced and had first-hand experience of both pre-conflict and post-conflict periods. For example, one interviewee from Tajikistan had remained at the same university with only one break since completing undergraduate studies there in the late 1950s. Respondents worked across the range of academic disciplines.

Interviews were conducted in locally dominant languages in which the authors are native/fluent speakers (Arabic in Iraq, Russian in Tajikistan). As in other recent studies of conflict affected education systems (Milton, 2019), snowball sampling was an effective method to identify suitable participants. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method for this small-scale qualitative study, allowing respondents to construct their own narratives and sense-making processes (Merriam, 2009; Miller & Glassner, 2004). During the interviews, which ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, participants were asked about their professional journey and the benefits and challenges of post-conflict changes in higher education at system and organizational level. The interview protocols were grounded in both the pre- and post-conflict contexts that connect to the conceptual framework (Crossley, 2010; Merriam, 2009).

Constant comparison and qualitative case study methods were used to gain an in-depth view of the internationalization of higher education within the context of conflict and its legacy. An iterative process of coding and constant comparison (Fram, 2013; O'Connor et al., 2008) was conducted, first using the participants' interviews then comparing this to the definition of the internationalization of higher education, thus adding credibility and reliability to the study (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The Constant Comparison Method (CCM) is an iterative and inductive process of reducing the data through constant recoding and it involves breaking down the data into discrete 'incidents' and coding them to categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Selected quotes exemplify how, in their own words, respondents discussed the themes and perceive the role of government. Where respondents made statements that were potentially inaccurate or problematic, a footnote to contextualize their comment was added. Due to the authors' institutional ethics board requirements, quotes have been fully anonymized and are identified in the paper by whether the respondent is based in Iraq or Tajikistan.

This study is limited to higher education in Iraq and Tajikistan as two post-conflict societies. It takes a micro-level perspective through its use of interviews and therefore limits the scope of the study to the responses of this group of faculty members. Perspectives of other pertinent actors (e.g., ministry decision and policy makers, prospective students, academic leaders) were not represented in this study.

INTERPRETING INTERNATIONALIZATION

The analysis of the 26 interviews and locally based definition of the internationalization of higher education led to four broad and inclusive themes on faculty perceptions of higher education internationalization in Iraq and Tajikistan, each of which connects to the ideas raised in the conceptual framework and are introduced with an excerpt of a quote from one of the respondents. The first theme discusses "how to introduce yourself to the world" – that is, reconnecting with the international academic community; the second theme explores how "scholarships opened many horizons" for student and faculty mobility; the third, "we do the research together," explores how faculty members have been able to engage in international research collaborations; and the fourth theme, "it's like the sky and the earth," examines how branch campuses and joint programs are being used to import prestige. The following sub-sections discuss each theme and compare findings between the two countries.

"How You Introduce Yourself to the World": Reconnecting with the International Academic Community

Years of isolation due to war and the degradation of higher education after 2003 have magnified the role that Iraqi respondents felt could be played by internationalization. As one respondent described it:

> Iraqi universities … for 35 years were distanced from the international space, distanced from international classifications, distanced from many aspects. One of the issues is how you introduce yourself to the world … partnership is the best way to take your university to the world.

Because of conflict, economic sanctions/crisis, and, in Iraq, sectarian divisions, the two higher education systems have been kept out of the latest developments and trends in global higher education. As one Iraqi academic put it, the internationalization of higher education is a way to "learn the international language," to bridge the gap created by conflict. In Iraq, reconnection was also related to recollections of the country's pre-conflict higher education system. Another faculty member viewed internationalization as a means of re-establishing a position on the academic map through strategies such as publishing in international journals, asserting "we started to introduce our university to the world by encouraging faculty to publish their academic work in internationally recognized journals that can be read by others outside Iraq."

Iraqi respondents also made clear connections between publishing in international journals and collaborative research, noting how this facilitates knowledge transfer and moves beyond local knowledge as elaborated by an Iraqi professor "a faculty member should engage in joint work with international scholars. The most important thing is to get out of the trenches of local knowledge, there are no limits out there."

Most Iraqi universities present themselves as research institutions. As such, publishing their research is a key component in faculty members' promotion. The pressure to publish in highly ranked journals is exacerbated by a sense of urgency to reconnect to the global academic space through rankings. Iraqi academics understand that to enter the global arena of rankings, they should internationalize their activities. As a respondent from Iraq commented "we should focus on research and publications because this will raise our position in the university ranking."

The entry of Iraqi universities into international rankings is the first of five goals laid out in the 2018-22 government program. In the program, rankings are considered an indicator of the quality of higher education (MHESR, n.d.). Similar strategies were seen as important as they add a competitive edge to Iraqi higher education, bringing it back to its perceived former glory. As one respondent recalled:

In the 1970s our education was the best internationally, not only in the region. In the 1950s and 1960s, before the 1958 revolution, Baghdad University was ranked 50th worldwide. We hoped that after the fall of the previous regime in 2003, Iraq would go back to this era.

While university ranking is a recent trend in the landscape of higher education worldwide, this metaphorical connotation reflects how Iraqi academics perceived it as a fast track to restore the reputation of their public universities and ultimately be able to place a position in the international academic map.

Respondents in Tajikistan experienced a different form of isolation before conflict; they were linked to some peers but generally as part of international communist networks. In this context, reconnection for academics in Tajikistan was often associated with former metropole Russia. For example, although a 2011 regulation means that Tajikistan is no longer reliant on Russia to approve postgraduate degrees, one respondent spoke of how the Tajik government continues to look to Russia in making changes to the higher education curriculum stating, "they blindly take the [Russian] program, make light changes to it – they don't bring in noticeable changes – and they promote it as 'our' program." Thus, while Russia and Tajikistan are now positioned as international partners, the Soviet-era legacy that placed Tajikistan (and some other republics) in the periphery with unequal access to some forms of higher education and the resulting intellectual dependency on Russia persists, even now that the countries have been independent for almost 30 years. As the literature also shows (Merrill 2020), the theme of reconnecting with the world in post-conflict Tajikistan exposes a disconnect between government rhetoric about joining the 'world education system' (Government of Tajikistan, 2012) and the lived reality of respondents for whom such connections relate not internationally but primarily to Russia's aims and visions.

"Scholarships Opened Many Horizons": Opportunities and Challenges of Student and Faculty Mobility

Student and faculty mobility came up as critical mechanisms to overcome years of isolation (Iraq) or little prior global engagement (Tajikistan). In Tajikistan, this was not only the result of conflict but also connected to the collapse of the Soviet Union:

In 1992 [a year after the collapse of the Soviet Union], I went to Iran for a physics conference. In 1994, I went to New Delhi and so it went on, travelling around the world from Norway to Nepal, from Turkey to Mongolia. I've been able to do this because Tajikistan is independent.

Respondents in both countries tended to focus on student (as opposed to faculty) mobility, emphasizing the benefits of study abroad to experience the world and live in a different society after years of isolation. Immersing in these new experiences was seen to provide positive educational opportunities for students to be exposed to the latest technologies and techniques in their respective fields. This is reflected by a Tajikistani respondent:

> Globalization is happening, and it's important that our students' degrees can be
> recognized everywhere. This allows them to enrol not just in Tajikistan, but it
> also means they can further their studies in other countries… There shouldn't
> be barriers for citizens of Tajikistan.

These comments resonate with the experience of non-conflict afflicted countries, where international student mobility is seen to contribute to global understanding as mobile graduates utilize the knowledge they accumulate about other countries and understanding of the diversity of cultures and society (Kehm, 2005). The quotes also connect to the literature on internationalization in Iraq and Tajikistan, where student mobility is identified as one of the most common ways in which internationalization takes place (e.g., Merrill, 2011). In relation to student mobility, many respondents in Iraq also discussed the role of funding for students to study abroad. One respondent in Iraq recorded "Scholarships opened many horizons, people went to China, US, Canada, UK, Australia, German, Malaysia, so many countries. Cultures and knowledge started to transfer."

This interpretation is in line with government policy, where the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research launched a 'Study Missions (Scholarship) Program' in 2009 for graduate study with a preference for the US and western European universities, and in 2011 launched the Iraqi Scholarships Scheme/Future Capacity Building Program to fund 10,000 scholarships for graduate study abroad. These scholarship initiatives were framed around narrowing the gap between the standards of education in Iraq and those of the world. This gap was believed to be reduced through increasing the exposure of Iraqi students to modern international standards of research and methodology, to encourage Iraqi academics to improve their teaching and research skills, enhancing curriculum that is compatible with international standards, and improving the administration skills of higher education leaders.

The Tajik government has also provided some support for study abroad through the Centre for International Programs, established in 2008, and a state scholarship program for around 200 students a year (Asia-Plus, 2013; Hasanova, 2009). However, funding for students to study abroad was seen by one respondent in Tajikistan as a form of "humanitarian aid," suggesting a connection between the raft of international aid organizations that came to work in the country as a result of the civil war and the continued need for such support even as the country's conflict experience fades.

As such, the theme of student and faculty mobility describes the ways in which respondents felt internationalization could support them to catch up with other settings that began to open up earlier, but it is also a way of demonstrating that the gap remains wide because governments have limited financial resources to propel reforms such as international mobility programs on a large scale. This also applied to the Iraq case. In addition, even when financing has been made available, the impact that returning scholarship holders have been able to make has been restricted, as one respondent from Iraq commented:

> The education system in Iraq is old. No updates, reforms, or modernization
> have happened. Those who went on scholarships were not able to make real
> changes because the system is old, and the Ministry is making many ad hoc
> solutions that do not make real changes or reform movements.

A finding specific to Tajikistan was the importance ascribed to integration through the implementation of the Bologna Process. Some faculty felt it offered important opportunities for greater integration into a globalized world:

Because of the European Union's support, I think that all higher education institutions in Tajikistan are able to be part of big projects…many students and academics can participate in international summer schools, courses, trainings. I think it's giving a great result.

However, other respondents felt that this form of internationalization would not, in fact, lead to greater integration for the Tajikistani academic community as presented in this quote "just because the Bologna Process works in Germany [and other EU countries] doesn't mean it's the best process for our education. Our people have a completely different mentality." Respondents, therefore, had mixed views about the suitability of the Bologna Process as a means for Tajikistan to use academic mobility to integrate into the international academic community and no consensus emerged from the interviews.

"We Do the Research Together": Exploring International Research Collaborations

In both Iraq and Tajikistan, faculty members emphasized the importance of research collaboration, working with other universities/Academies of Sciences either on a bilateral basis or as part of larger consortia. The way these features play out in practice was exemplified by one respondent in Tajikistan "some people from here went to Paris to do internships; they helped us organize conferences, to publish books. Those are the types of collaboration we have."

As the literature also shows, research collaboration is a longstanding strategy to share knowledge and resources that brings important benefits to individuals, institutions, and national and regional education systems (Knight & Lee, 2012). Research collaboration in the specific post-conflict settings of Iraq and Tajikistan is also a means of (re)connecting with the world and taking a position on the international academic map. There was little expectation that taking a position in the international community would be the same as countries considered to be more 'advanced' in the global higher education system, but there was a great desire among faculty members to have the opportunity to become integrated and to be considered on their own merits. In Tajikistan, one respondent explained how this connection could work in a mutually beneficial way:

> When they [the foreign partners] come here to do, for example, an archaeological excavation, we provide them with everything – accommodation, transport, people. If it's an international expedition then there would always be two directors, one from their side and one from ours. We do the research together.

In many respects, there is a universality to academic research and knowledge creation. It has always been and will remain important to academics to collaborate with their epistemic communities, which may not necessarily be co-located in the same geographic space. Thus, even during the isolated Soviet period in which teaching and research were largely separated, researchers co-authored internationally, albeit at lower rates than would be expected given the size of the Soviet research system (Frame & Carpenter, 1979). However, a respondent in Tajikistan explained "when the war was happening, no one talked about research. It was all about surviving," which reflect that relative isolation coupled with conflict led to at least a temporary hiatus on research collaboration.

Research collaboration was seen by one faculty member in Iraq as "part of the requirements of a modern college"– that is to say, an integral and normal activity for higher education. There are, however, concerns that such collaborations may privilege or reify a model of higher education grounded in Western (Anglo-American) thinking. Some Iraqi academics were alarmed about the lack of equality and fairness of research collaboration in terms of the applicability of the research to local problems of post-conflict societies. This concern is reflected by a respondent in Iraq:

> We should not give a student a scholarship to study abroad unless we send him with a specific research problem that solves a local problem. I should not send

a student abroad and spend a lot of money and then his supervisor tells him
your research will be on this problem. And he solves a problem abroad and
only the supervisor gets benefit.

"It's Like the Sky and the Earth": Importing Prestige through Branch Campuses and Joint Programs

Respondents in both Iraq and Tajikistan discussed how internationalization was being used or had the potential to enhance the reputation and quality of higher education, which can be termed importing prestige. The role played by branch campuses and foreign universities came up as an important recent development in both countries. Faculty respondents in Iraq view international branch campuses as better alternatives to the low-quality private institutions that mushroomed after the 2003 conflict, as a respondent reflected "if we have reputable international universities, believe me, all these private universities will end." This aligns with the literature, particularly for the Middle East region, that suggests that economic, political, and cultural shifts led to a demand for improved local higher education options (Miller‐Idriss & Hanauer, 2011). In Iraq, two private American-style universities already operate in Kurdistan Region and an American-style university in Baghdad officially opened in 2018. Also in 2018, the Minister of Higher Education called on British universities and institutes to open branch campuses in Iraq (Al-Iraqia University, 2018), reflecting greater opening up of higher education at the policy level.

This emphasis on international branch campuses and universities is also a response to widespread corruption in the public sector, which is seen to have limited the capacity of higher education to contribute to post-conflict recovery. Coupled with state control over public and private universities, respondents in Iraq saw a need for alternative ways to improve the status and the reputation of higher education such as building partnerships with western universities through the import of foreign institutions. The transfer of experience from international partners was perceived by respondent from Iraq as" a competitive factor and a stimulus for innovation, so it is an opportunity for development."

In Tajikistan, all bar one of the branch campuses are operated by Russian state-run higher education institutions. This includes Moscow State, the most prestigious Russian university, which was the first branch campus to open in 2009. Faculty respondents in Tajikistan were uniformly positive about the arrival of Russian branch campuses. The following respondent's comments are typical:

It's like the sky and the earth – their [Moscow State's] requirements are
different. When you ask more of a student, they will try harder. They don't
accept bribes there; students only get knowledge… In the final year, students
do a month-long exchange at the main campus in Moscow. They can attend any
lectures they want. It's great. Moscow State is genuinely an international
[world class] university.

This quote shows several factors that imported institutions are deemed to bring to higher education: quality of education, lack of corruption, the possibility for mobility, and the opportunity to receive a degree from a university known around the world. This resonates with another study that found that "where Russian universities have a monopoly on transnational provision, Russian international branch campuses enjoy high prestige" (Chankseliani, 2018, p. 7).

Respondents also described the importance of working with external institutions of repute through twinning initiatives and joint degrees. The notion that the prestige of the partner university would transfer to their institutions was described by a respondent in Iraq "I think that one of the things that could upgrade the quality of higher education is twinning with other universities. Then the names of these universities will be used."

Tajikistan has only one university offering joint degrees, the Russian-Tajik Slavonic University. For several years after it opened in 1996, it was considered to be the most prestigious university in the country, not least because it was considered to offer a new start for higher education in the dying days of the civil war. It has now garnered enough of a reputation that one respondent suggested a degree from the university offered a "guarantee of knowledge." However, this has not led to a demand for additional joint universities. Rather, the international branch campus model with Russian universities continues to be the dominant partnership model in Tajikistan.

Bringing in programs and curricula from other settings were seen as important aspects of internationalization driven in part by the urgent needs of academics to be exposed to the latest developments in their academic disciplines. As a respondent in Iraq recounted "in our department we try to understand how the world is doing in our area." The adoption of imported curricula from predominantly western universities in Iraq is perceived as not only prestigious but a practical way to bridge the gap created by conflict that respondents saw as extending beyond the curriculum itself. As a respondent from Iraq expressed:

> The name of these institutions [that are used for the imported curricula] is something for people as they are looking for quality—we are all living in this system, we are all complaining, we are all trying to make a change.

While this may be a common theme in some countries, Tajikistan's universities do not have formal arrangements to import curricula or programs from other settings. The university curriculum is managed by the government (as it was in the Soviet era) and there is limited autonomy for academics to introduce innovation into the curriculum. Even the privately-run University of Central Asia has found itself subject to government control, forced to add in some of the state-mandated compulsory modules to its degree programming. This difference between how Iraq and Tajikistan are importing prestige through internationalization connects to the continued legacy of the previous regime on higher education in Tajikistan as well as how the government has sought to cement its authority as the aftermath of conflict receded (Sabzalieva, 2020).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored how academics in two post-conflict societies have interpreted the internationalization of higher education in connection with their pre- and post-conflict realities. Our interviews highlighted four themes in these perceptions that were illustrated using quotes from respondents: "how you introduce yourself to the world," "scholarships opened many horizons," "we do the research together," and "it's like the sky and the earth." Each of these pithy statements conveys some of the opportunities and challenges now being created by different internationalization activities, which have included student and faculty mobility, international research collaborations, international branch campuses and joint programs.

These dynamics presented under the four broad headings are inter-related and are connected to how the internationalization of higher education has been defined and how it continues to be shaped by contextual factors. For instance, government bureaucracy and corruption were seen by respondents in both Iraq and Tajikistan as constraining internationalization processes. In Iraq, for example, imported curricula generally do not go through the same bureaucratic approval process as for local curricula and were therefore seen by some as a means of avoiding ministerial control. As one respondent stated, "there is a lot of red tape, we are always trying to update our curriculum to make it close to the western or the international ones." Another respondent

in Iraq clarified that the political context also led to a preference for international universities, which are seen to be independent from the sectarianism that still permeates the government "we hope these [international] universities have their own independence without the interference of the Ministry." In Iraq, high levels of government corruption and corresponding low levels of public trust led faculty to support international over local higher education standards and models, whereas in Tajikistan corruption came up as a driver for the introduction of major reforms such as the European Bologna Process. As one respondent observed:

> The World Bank gave a large grant – huge sums of money – and one of the main conditions was that the Bologna Process be introduced. It was a requirement of the donor… Our functionaries need money, you understand… we don't know whether the grant was used for its intended purpose or not.

This may also connect to the relatively low resources available to fund higher education in the country, leading to ongoing reliance on external funders (Sabzalieva, 2020).

Iraq and Tajikistan may be later adopters of internationalization practices as a result of conflict, but the ways in which internationalization is unfolding appear to be similar to practices seen around the world (e.g., for other Asian settings, see Palmer & Cho, 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Xie, 2018). In these studies, the imperatives for internationalization are presented as a response to the pressures of globalization, where internationalization is increasingly based on competition rather than a collaborative model. While the motives are somewhat different from Iraq and Tajikistan, the interpretation of these practices is similar. However, in this study, we did not find any themes related to competition or an economic-driven orientation that is dominant in the internationalization activities of many global higher education systems.

In both countries, respondents largely discussed internationalization as a positive development, with little mention of its associated risks or the disadvantages that it may bring to societies already facing significant challenges such as brain drain (Barclay, 2002) and the reproduction of aid-dependency (Samoff & Carrol, 2004). Confidence in the benefits of internationalization was demonstrated across the four themes in the paper. One clear example of this was study abroad, widely recognized by interviewees as a tool to transfer knowledge and culture that provides students with the opportunity to obtain an education abroad and later return home to help the development of their home country. In this way, student and faculty mobility serves to bridge the gap created by conflict and to reconnect with the world. Notwithstanding the identification of political and economic constraints, the idealization of internationalization by respondents avoids critical reflection on how the higher education systems in Iraq and Tajikistan may be detrimentally impacted by the pursuit of criteria and practices that have evolved in a Western paradigm.

Although there has been debate about whether the era of internationalization of higher education has come to an end (Altbach & de Wit, 2018), these findings show that internationalization is still an emerging phenomenon in Iraq and Tajikistan. This paper's focus on how internationalization processes in Iraq and Tajikistan are interpreted by faculty respondents sheds new light on how those on the frontline are engaging in

internationalization and how they view its role in higher education. The emphasis on path dependency in pre-conflict history and conflict as a critical juncture brought the specific context of these two states to the fore and put forward a framework to better understand how these contextual factors are intertwined and influencing faculty perceptions of internationalization.

This paper offers three contributions to the study of internationalization of higher education in contemporary post-conflict settings. Firstly, relaying the frontline experiences shared by 26 faculty respondents demonstrates how higher education reform is playing out in practice in two post-conflict settings. This adds to previous studies that have primarily focused on the role of higher education in reconstructing and stabilizing post-conflict societies. Secondly, whereas the act of conflict often forms the focal point for analysis as a critical juncture for post-conflict higher education, this study has shown the importance of also accounting for path dependence, the pre-conflict norms and values brought forward to higher education in Iraq and Tajikistan today. Thirdly, while internationalization has been dominated by practice (Maringe et al., 2013), this study added conceptual framing by examining it within the context of (post) conflict settings.

Future research could analyze how post-conflict societies fit into the global landscape of higher education, opening up scope for a more critical approach to the impact of internationalization in post-conflict societies. There is also ample scope for research comparing experiences of internationalization of higher education between conflict-affected and non-conflict affected settings. An area not covered directly in this research, but which would also add to the literature on Iraq and Tajikistan would be a more detailed study of the impact of internationalization processes at both policy and institutional levels, for example in the development of institutional strategies for internationalization. Finally, this study could be extended to include the voices of students and policymakers in both countries.

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