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Al-Qudis Preparatory School is back for the future of Iraq

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BAGHDAD, Iraq - In September of last year, destruction was everywhere, inside and out, of the Mansour District's al-Qudis Preparatory School for Boys. The windows were broken, doors off their mangled hinges, the blackboards blasted off the walls, unusable desks destroyed and multiple evidence of classroom wall fires. The al-Jamiaa'a neighborhood, where Qudis is located, had seen its share of turmoil, being variably occupied by Coalition Forces and insurgents, during the past few years.

According to locals, the school was a frequent target of insurgents because of the location in a wealthy neighborhood and the reputation as one of the leading boys' schools in Baghdad. When a terrorist explosion in late summer claimed the nearby Baghdad Satellite TV Channel, it was the last straw for holding classes at Qudis. The school was further, extensively damaged, shut down and temporarily abandoned. With improved security and the help of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), things have changed dramatically for the better.

"All the school was damaged from the blast. But now, with the rehabilitation, the school is more beautiful than before. The students are eager to attend and study," said Chemistry teacher Enas Abdullah, through a translator.

Fortunately, the three major school buildings and their superstructures were not significantly damaged, so renovation and reconstruction were the most challenging jobs. Removal of extensive debris and replacing all electrical wiring headed



Students attending the newly re-opened school talk between classes at the al-Qudis Preparatory School for Boys. (USACE photo by Kendal Smith)

the list of needed repairs. Major renovation was needed for the fresh water and sewage systems. Toilets were rebuilt or replaced and new cooling and air conditioning units installed. Various tasks in masonry and brickwork were followed by repainting of interior and exterior walls. Extensive landscaping and gardening completed the new look. The school grounds and area were also treated for Iraqi termite extermination.

Completed and reopened a month ahead of schedule, the more than \$568,000 project was overseen by Navy Lt. Cmdr. Charles Smith, the USACE International Zone Resident Office chief.



Renovation included interior and exterior work.
(USACE photo by Kendal Smith)

"It's a great feeling of accomplishment. Going there and seeing the kids use the school. All in all, a good news story," he said during a recent visit to show the school to media.

"Here's a good example of the way things are supposed to work," Smith continued. He went on to explain the process for this particular project. Coming from the Provincial Reconstruction Development Council to USACE to execute and supervise, Smith explained Qudis was an Iraqi concept and design, completed by an Iraqi contractor, with the oversight of an Iraqi USACE project engineer. Money for the project came from the Economic Support Fund.

Al-Iraqiyah TV, Al-Hurra TV and the Associated Press visited the site of the Iraqi-led renovation in March. There were more than 500 young men 15-18 years old at work on their university preparatory studies. In Iraq, high school students are channeled into two primary divisions for higher education, Science or Literature. The potential impact these Science students could have in their country is not lost on them.

"I want to help my country to rebuild, so I'll try to get the damaged buildings back to their condition before they were

destroyed by the insurgency. And the way it used to be before the destruction," said Mahmud, one of Abdullah's students.

This 11th grader hopes to score well enough on his end-of-school tests next year to have the option of engineering or medicine. A score above 95 percent is required to make that happen. He looks studious despite the obviously crowded and noisy class during the visit. Some desks have three students at them, but they are comfortable talking to media, a sure sign of a more stable, secure environment.

According to the contractor, there was great support from the local residents as they frequently offered food and encouragement to the workers. All the laborers were from the Mansour neighborhood. Training was conducted to help the Iraqi workers understand topics including standards of health, safety, immediate action in the event of an incident and danger-zone construction. In addition, a strategy was used by the contractor to speed the building and work. They referred to employment of "on-hand" workers used as needed to surge during the busiest times at the job site. That brought needed jobs to the local area and helped the security as well.

The new facilities were even selected for a special event visit by a Deputy Minister of Education to officially reopen the school last month.

"Attendance is good. I can even say it's perfect," said Abdullah. "We hope that God keeps the youth who are our future."

In another certain mark of improvements both in education and security, student Mahmud offers that his ". . . hope for Iraq is improving the electricity," and the goal of teenagers everywhere, ". . . and lifting the curfew in all the country."

Sounds very familiar from an 11th grade young man, doesn't it?

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