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Schools bring hope to Iraq

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Baghdad, Iraq – Themes of hope dominate school openings and ribbon cutting events throughout Iraq. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Gulf Region Division has overseen the renovation or new construction of nearly 1,100 schools, and another 38 are still in construction.

"This ancient civilization of Mesopotamia between the two rivers taught the world how to read and how to write," said Ahmed Rubayee, director general of Baghdad's Rusafa secondary education department at Al Neel School, which opened in July. "That is what we are doing here today, establishing a school - and to once again be civilized and concentrate on teaching our children to read and write."

With the same theme of hope in a stable civilization for education, a new wing of six classrooms for Al Abrar primary school, south of Baghdad, opened for students on Oct. 15. Located in the Mahmoudiyah Qada district, this \$496,000 project adds much



Imam Al Sadiq 48: Workers prepare the Imam Al Sadiq School grounds in Al Abrar. (USACE photo)

needed classroom space and facilities for this rural area.



Ribbon Cutting: Al Abrar Headmaster Mahmoud Alewee cuts the ribbon with Central District Project Engineer Philip Taylor. (USACE photo)

"The ribbon cutting for this school not only signals the completion of a building, it signals one small addition of hope for the Iraqi people," said Col. Ron Light, Gulf Region Central district commander. "While we are here to celebrate the completion of a school, more importantly, you can see the faces of hope on the children. You see the joy of being at a decent school, and that is exciting."

The school has more than 650 students, but due to a lack of teachers, can only conduct one crowded session. At the ceremony, Al Abrar's headmaster, Mahmoud Alewee said, "This new building serves us well since the school was never expanded from its beginning in 1960 until now, but we need more rooms."

Two additional new-construction schools in the Qada area are 50 percent complete and are expected to finish in January before the second semester begins.



Al Abrar Break: Students run back to classrooms after the Al Abrar ribbon cutting ceremony. (USACE photo)

Buildings are a large concern, but adequate teachers and headmasters continue to be an issue for the Ministry of Education. By most western standards, Iraqi schools open with too many students and not enough staff.

Typical of Iraqi school construction for both elementary and secondary, the two-story masonry buildings at Al Neel contain 12 classrooms, an administration section, a workshop, and bathroom facilities in a 3,500 square meter walled compound. A mirror image is near completion in Husseinayah, as Imam Al Sadiq Elementary will open later in November. Clearly the newest building in a rubble-strewn area north of Baghdad, Al Sadiq is remarkable for the contrast to its surroundings.

Al Bayaa Elementary School is an additional example of ongoing construction to meet increasing demands. Its 12 classrooms for 500 students will reside in a two-story masonry building with a one-story administration building, restrooms, a canteen and playground on a 7,500 square meter property in the southwestern part of Baghdad. Al Bayaa is scheduled for occupancy by the first of next year.

As a definite bonus to educating the local children, the more than 1,100 school projects throughout Iraq have significant economic stimulus inherent with the hiring of local contractors, suppliers, craftsmen and

laborers in the specific neighborhoods where the work is executed.

According to Director General Rubayee, there are 100 more schools, similar to the high standards of Al Neel, being built in the Rusafa area alone. He says Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has announced plans for 4,000 more schools in the very near future.

"Thank you for your patriotism and the support to Iraq in this critical time," Rubayee said to the USACE staff at the July opening. "We are all doing this for the children, for the future of Iraq."



Al Neel School Ribbon Cutting: Director General of Rusafa secondary education department and Maj. Robert Culberson, GRC's Loyalty Resident Office officer in charge, officially open Al Neel School. (USACE photo)

"This is a symbol of Iraq returning to normalcy," Light said at Al Abrar. "It is a progression of wonderful things happening in Iraq for the benefit of the Iraqi people."

"Abrar" is a reverential word related to doing good deeds. In rebuilding an ancient nation working to restore its civilization, such deeds are not only essential, but critical to success.



Al Bayaa Stairs: The interior stairs of Al Bayaa School are ready for students. (USACE photo)

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