

American Profiles: June 2011

George Papagiannis

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***U.S. UNESCO:* How did you end up working in Iraq for UNESCO?**

George Papagiannis: I started with UNESCO in the fall of 2007, and my initial assignment was to come and work in the division of Freedom of Expression, Democracy and Peace at the headquarters in Paris.

Towards the end of my second year, we were encountering some challenges in our Iraq office in that there wasn't really an opportunity to have a steady representative based in Baghdad. And I had already done work in Baghdad when I was working for Internews, the media development NGO. So my boss said, 'well, maybe you could help us out in what we're trying to accomplish in Iraq, where we really don't have a steady presence'. And I just jumped at the opportunity.

In spite of the difficulties, in spite of the dangers and challenges, to me it had great appeal. I believe that there is wonderful opportunity in the midst of chaos. Not to suggest that today's Iraq is chaotic, but there are very many challenges that we need to overcome in order to help the Iraqi people achieve the vision that they want for their country. And I believe that what they want are functioning democratic institutions that give them a say in how their government is run, that give them the opportunity to develop their families, their own personal wealth, and to live in peace.

***U.S. UNESCO:* What kind of work is UNESCO doing in Iraq?**

George Papagiannis: In the area of education, we're working on pedagogy, curriculum development, teacher training, and institutional capacity building. In science, we have a project that is dealing with the water resources in Iraq. In culture, we work in historical preservation. Everybody knows of Iraq perhaps from their history lessons as kids. Mesopotamia is where Iraq is, and it is *rich* in cultural heritage that is important not only to Iraqis—it's *world* heritage. In the area of media development the work that we do is essential because we're attempting to help Iraqis give themselves, through a professional media industry, an independent media sector—information that they need in real time to make decisions about what they do every day and what they might want to do in the future. And these are all critical.

U.S. UNESCO: Why should Americans support UNESCO?

George Papagiannis: I think that what UNESCO represents are the highest values that Americans embrace. UNESCO is an organization that is committed to peace, to justice, and to creating economic opportunity for people by creating knowledge societies—by providing people access to information, by improving the quality of education, by ensuring that natural resources are managed appropriately. These are key elements that I think all Americans embrace.

Our values and the principles that have helped to develop our America are, I believe, universal values. Universal values of respect for human rights, universal values for having equal opportunity because you have access to information. I think these are shared values, and I think UNESCO is the kind of organization within the UN family that specifically has a unique mandate that allows it to move forward on these key and critical issues—these key and critical *development* issues.