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First Students in Iraqi Scholarship Program May Arrive in U.S. This Fall

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Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki formally unveiled a government program on Saturday that will bring hundreds of Iraqi students to the United States on full scholarships as early as this fall.

The program, called the [Iraq Education Initiative](#), intends eventually to send 10,000 students to English-speaking countries each year for five years. It is part of a broader effort being driven by the prime minister's office to improve Iraq's education system.

Speaking Saturday morning to a crowd of about 200 academics and diplomatic officials here, Mr. al-Maliki said Iraq's once-renowned education system had been deeply damaged by decades of war and sanctions. The [new scholarship program](#), he said, is driven by the same spirit of reform that is pushing the nation to create a democratic and pluralistic political system.

"We will not stop at sending students abroad, but also look for further cooperation between our system and American universities," the prime minister said through an interpreter.

Mr. al-Maliki spoke at a ceremony hosted by the Academy for Educational Development, a nonprofit organization focused on international education, health, and development that has agreed to help the Iraqi government create the program's organizational structure and administrative procedures. Academy officials said they were working to make the program as open and nonpartisan as possible to ensure lasting political support.

Iraq's parliament has set aside \$54-million for the pilot phase of the program, in which 500 to 600 students will be sent to the United States or Britain this year for either undergraduate or graduate degrees. Of those, about 300 will head to the United States.

On Saturday, Eric D. Fingerhut, chancellor of the University System of Ohio, signed an agreement with Mr. al-Maliki committing Ohio to enroll 100 of the first wave of students and one-third of all future students coming to the United States through the scholarship program.

Mr. Fingerhut said the agreement made sense to Ohio because the system's leaders have made increasing international-student enrollments a top priority. He noted that many Ohio families had been hit hard by the war and that being able to show the state another side of Iraq gave this agreement a "particular resonance."

Zuhair A. G. Humadi, executive director of the Higher Committee for the Educational Development of Iraq, which will administer the program, said on Saturday that the committee had already received 300 to 400 applications since it formally announced the scholarship program about a week ago.

Mr. Humadi anticipates that the first students could arrive in the United States as early as October, although some American university representatives at the event said they thought January was the more-likely start date. Many of the students will need to enroll in English-language courses before starting their degree programs.

The Higher Committee, which is being run out of the prime minister's office, is working in partnership with the American Universities Iraq Consortium. That group was formed after a number of American college representatives visited Iraq in January at the government's invitation. Member colleges have agreed to admit the scholarship students. There are now 21 consortium members, a number of whom were represented Saturday. Mr. Humadi said membership is open to any accredited higher-education institution.

Mr. Humadi said that the Iraq delegation had discussed the program during a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton earlier in the week. He said she had assured him that the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, which only recently began processing student visa applications, would cooperate with the Iraqi government to make sure there are no unnecessary problems with visa issuances.

Mr. al-Maliki and others involved with the program said that it had widespread support in parliament and across political parties. That may help it survive even if Mr. al-Maliki is no longer at the helm. His government faces national elections in January.