Allan E. Goodman
Remarks at the G7 International Higher Education Summit
Berlin, 18 June 2015

The Role of International Education in a Time of Crises

The Institute of International Education was honored last night to be a part of the celebrations to mark the 90th anniversary of the founding of the DAAD in whose creation we played a role. The Nobel Peace Prize laureates who founded IIE in 1919 and advised their German friends to set up a similar organization just a few years later sought to avert future wars through educational exchange. Despite their hopes, this did not happen. But over the years we did learn a great deal about how to keep the hope for peace and reconciliation alive during times of conflict and then to assist in rebuilding national academies and reforming higher education systems once hostilities had ended.

Since the Institute's Scholar Rescue Fund is particularly active these days in the Middle East and North Africa and our conference is focusing in this session on how educational programs and projects can contribute to stabilize and reconcile societies in the region, I understand why I was asked to speak. Thank you for the opportunity even though the news is not good. Earlier in our conference Secretary General Dorothea Rüland noted that the long period of peace which started with the end of the Cold War has come to an end and that the so-called end of history is over. Many forces today are making headlines, as well as history, as the number of interstate and intrastate conflicts intensify.

We see this acutely at the Scholar Rescue Fund, and not only in the MENA region. In the past decade, we have received nearly 5,000 requests for help from persons under attack and threat in more than 100 countries. The threats stem from a dizzying array of sources, not just repressive regimes trying to silence critics. There are multiple secular and sectarian terrorist groups who target academics as a powerful and chillingly efficient way to intimidate thousands and silence whole communities. Today, regrettably, a scholar can be threatened because of their gender or because they were fortunate enough to get their PhD in Germany or any of the countries represented here simply because a regime, imam, or terrorist has declared war on anything that is foreign or western. Or a scholar can be threatened because they had the good professional fortune to have an article published in an international journal or a book published by a western university press. And some who return from being awarded a DAAD grant or a Fulbright find themselves suddenly a target. In some countries we are quite literally seeing the end of universities as we know them and even those with distinguished and long histories as houses of wisdom.
In the past 24 months, we have had nearly 700 requests for help from scholars in the MENA region and so far have been able to make 153 grants in response. Since our program began in 2002, some 325 universities have matched our grants in providing stipends and safe havens of 1 to 2 years for the scholars we have rescued. The Scholar Rescue Fund works through a selection committee of Institute Trustees and friends and a network of field-specific academic advisers to evaluate requests based on the quality of scholarship and the degree of threat. We make no political judgments or statements, and we assist applicants without regard to matters of religion, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, or willingness of a host to take someone in. Still, the process is very hard on the Committee which meets quite often and sometimes must decide (or empower the Chairman to decide) in a matter of a single day. We don't always get it right. And sometimes scholars can't reach us with all the information we need to make a decision. We regularly solicit applications and referrals from a network of more than 25,000 colleagues and organizations around the world who are in positions to know about who is threatened and why.

When I mention these numbers and describe these dynamics to an academic audience, the most common response is "We had no idea."

But for us as for Goethe, "knowledge is not enough; we must apply." And this means to take action whenever and wherever we can with the more than 325 partner universities that host our scholars and the governments that recognize the importance of acting and saving not only individual lives but also the foundations on which higher education in some countries can be rebuilt when the scholar returns. In the past decade about half actually have returned – and virtually all want to do so. Several governments have also helped us considerably with our work – Jordan, Norway, France and the United States – and so I warmly welcome the speech and commitment last week of Germany's Foreign Minister to provide more support and fellowships to scientists and scholars throughout the world who are in danger due to their academic work. And this week it was a privilege to meet with representatives of both the Foreign Office and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation here in Berlin to see how we can work together to make Germany's commitment to helping threatened scholars a reality.

What lies ahead and what else can we do, in Goethe's word, "to apply" and act?

For reasons that will be clear shortly (and for which my colleagues at the Fund will, I hope, forgive me) I will address the needs of those beyond the scholars themselves.

As I mentioned, the aim of the Scholar Rescue Fund is to save individual academic lives in the hope that wars end, repressive regimes get ousted, and terrorists get defeated so that the persons we help can return to their countries and rebuild educational systems. And until recently, this was indeed happening. But the rise of ISIS in Iraq, Boko Haram in Africa, and the apparent resurgence of Al-Qaeda have led to scholars once again having to flee.

So I fear we are going to be faced with many scholars now, and especially from Syria and Iraq, who want to go back but cannot. We have faced this situation before and history has special
meaning speaking here in Berlin. In the early 1930s, the Institute saw what National Socialism portended for German universities and the Jewish and Catholic professors who taught in them. Under the leadership of our courageous assistant director Edward R. Murrow (who was not famous just yet) we formed an Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German (and later European) Scholars.

We worked from a list of about 6,000 names of scholars (including Albert Einstein) who were reaching out to American colleagues and relatives for help. We managed to assist 400 before the Nazi regime shut us down, including Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Thomas Mann, and Felix Bloch, placing many at leading U.S. universities. But we ran into placement problems and had about 100 left for whom we could not find haven.

As it happened, The New School in New York City and under Professor Alvin Johnson was considering establishing a graduate faculty with a particular emphasis on sociology. We happened to have around 100 rescued faculty who basically invented this field in Germany. And so the Graduate Faculty of The New School came into being.

We have looked hard and long for a similar opportunity today. This is because we will soon have dozens of Syrian and Iraqi scholars who cannot go back and for whom ISIS and the Assad government have issued death sentences. So we need a haven of a different sort where individual scholars might come together to plan for what Syria and many other places in the MENA region might become in its higher education system.

So my first call to act is for us to find such havens where groups of displaced scholars could come together to work on post-war projects and strategic plans – just as the scholars we placed at The New School did and, thus, gave the Marshall Plan the blueprint for how German education could be rebuilt.

Now because the plight of so many refugees and displaced persons has been in the news and mentioned so frequently in the remarks at this conference, let me turn to two other projects on which the G7 could very importantly and collectively work.

Because today scholars flee with entire families, we have come to learn that in the refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey there are a surprisingly large number of university students who have no place to go and no ability to access academic records even if they did. Can we not establish a "transcript depository" for current students in the region with which we are so concerned to send us their course and credits so if they or their families have to flee, they will not risk losing years of schooling and also the possibility of completing higher education in another country and system? If we do not address the needs of high school and university students as refugees we risk creating an entirely lost generation. And one that ISIS would only be too glad to recruit.

Finally, and since the average tenure of refugees in camps today is over 17 years, the youth that arrive with their families need to have their educational needs served. No camp has built a
university. But there are some pilot programs that are getting such students to access higher education if they can attend schools and universities nearby. IIE is piloting a project in Jordan to provide scholarships to students in and around the Za’atari refugee camp to continue their education at nearby universities. The goal is to identify university students displaced from their education due to the conflict with financial need and an interest in community service, and to enable them to complete their education in fields that help respond to the refugee crisis, such as teaching and nursing. The first “Campus to Campus” scholarship recipients are expected to resume their studies during the fall 2015 semester. I note that DAAD also has tried this and learned, as we have, that there needs to be scholarship provisions also for local Jordanian students so they do not feel themselves displaced by refugee students.

We meet today in a country that knows the value of peace. Several hundred years ago, its most famous philosopher Immanuel Kant developed an action plan for Perpetual Peace on which we are all still working. His sixth and final point was that: "No state, during war, should permit such acts of hostility which would make confidence in the subsequent peace impossible." While we have yet to see this attitude prevail in today’s conflicts, I hope I have suggested some concrete ways that international educational organizations can make the world we share a less dangerous place.