Since 1919 the Institute of International Education (IIE) has supported persecuted scholars from around the world. In 2001 IIE formalized these efforts with the Scholar Rescue Fund for scholars whose lives and work are threatened in their home countries. The fellowships provide temporary financial support at safe universities around the world so scholars can continue teaching and conducting their research. Institutions receiving these distinguished visitors provide matching support.

This year, the Indiana University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures is hosting Abdal-Razzaq Moaz, a distinguished authority on Syrian art and architecture.

Until January 2013 Moaz lived and worked in Damascus, lately as a professor and an administrator at Arab International University and previously as deputy minister of culture. Now he feels that he may never be able to go back.

Moaz began his university study in history at the University of Damascus. His father, Khaled Moaz, was a historian of Syrian architecture and a painter. His depictions of the Syrian world of the 1930s can be found in museums today. Abdal-Razzaq followed his father’s academic example, undertaking graduate study in France with experts on Syrian art at the University of Provence in Aix-en-Provence. Abdal-Razzaq Moaz’s
specialty was Middle East architecture and the way that architecture affected and was affected by society and community life. He taught at universities in Syria and France and has been a visiting scholar at universities all over the world, including five fellowships at Harvard. During the summer at IU, Moaz gave two talks. This fall, Moaz is teaching a course in the architecture of the Middle East and will give public lectures on his research into domestic architecture in Damascus and Cairo.

Syrian culture can be traced back to 10,000 B.C. Artifacts show that Damascus has been continuously occupied as a city since 2000 B.C. In his role as director general of antiquities and museums for Syria, Moaz had to be aware of all forms and ages of Syrian art and architecture—and all those studying it. “When I left my government post in 2007, there were 137 active excavation projects in my country.”

Today there are none. “The last two years have been very bad. It is too dangerous to do fieldwork.” A number of sites have been destroyed in military fighting, and others

“We are trying to get people from both sides, wherever they are, whatever side they are on, to recognize that what is being threatened is their heritage. It’s a heritage for all humanity.”
—Abdal-Razzaq Moaz
remain unprotected from looters seeking to trade in stolen artifacts. Moaz tried to continue his teaching until September 2012, but delays of up to three hours at checkpoints and uncertainty about getting through at all compelled him to give up trying to get to campus. “I recently asked a colleague if he continued to teach at the university. He said there are not many classes and classes are small. Most of our students and professors have left the country, and for most it has meant the collapse of their careers. The campus itself has been in danger. At one time, we moved everyone from campus to a hotel, splitting large rooms into smaller classrooms, but even the hotel was bombed.”

By necessity, Moaz’s attention has turned from study and research to preservation. Former students have established Facebook pages to track events that have affected Syrian cultural heritage and to provide a forum
for discussion of strategies to preserve that heritage. Moaz has made public statements on the need to stop bombing and looting. As deputy minister, he successfully lobbied UNESCO to add to its list of World Heritage Sites in Syria the Krak des Chevalliers and Citadel of Salah Ed-Din (Saladin), two castles of importance during and after the time of the Crusades. He has been part of a UNESCO committee that has drawn up a “red list” of the types of artifacts that customs officials should prevent being smuggled out of the country. Still, those wishing to protect Syrian cultural artifacts are frustrated by the inability to find effective solutions. “We have many committees,” Moaz said. “I was contacted recently by the curator of an important museum in Syria asking for yet another committee to stop the disastrous looting and destruction.”

Advocates for protection try to represent the effort as apolitical, but “official authorities declare that we really are making politics, that we are turning preservation into a political issue.” Moaz doesn’t know what would happen to him if he or his family returned to Syria; he continues to seek solutions from afar. “We are trying to get people from both sides, wherever they are, whatever side they are on, to recognize that what is being threatened is their heritage. It’s a heritage for all humanity.”
Bayt Nassan, a palatial residence in Old Damascus, decorated in Islamic style. Photo © 2013 Ziad Alset.

The inscription on the Omari Mosque in Daraa, a city in southern Syria, quotes from the Quran, honors Salah al-Din Yusuf, great-grandson of Saladin, and notes the date, 1256. The mosque (below), has roots back to the eighth century. It was completely destroyed in April 2013. Credit: Issam Hajjar
Abdal-Razzaq Moaz’s father, Khaled Moaz (on the left in the photo), was a leading twentieth-century historian of Syrian architecture and a colleague of the French art historian Jean Sauvaget (right). Moaz was also a painter, and his work, often reflecting his architectural interests, can be found in Syrian museums today. Top left is Moaz’s painting of the city of Hama and the Al-Kaylaniyya noria, a waterwheel used since Roman times to draw water from the Orontes River for deposit in aqueducts that once irrigated the fertile farm lands surrounding the city. Top center is a Damascus scene from the 1930s with the sixteenth-century Ottoman Mosque of Tekkiya in the background. Top right is the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus with an ancient caravanserai, Khan As’ad Pasha Al’Azm, used as a stopping place along trade routes, in the foreground. Although Moaz painted a Syria very different from the present, these buildings survive and are among the cultural treasures that students and scholars would like to see protected.