

Taekwondo:
Learning and Teaching Across Cultures



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“Nothing is a more universal language, frankly, than sport. People who engage in sports have a common language¹.”

Adam Erel

Taekwondo is a common language that unites the poorest third world countries with the wealthiest developed nations. After all, even our US Government acknowledges how “sports diplomacy” transcends differences through a shared love for the sport and encourages positive youth development². Since it became a full medal sport in the Olympics in 2000³, the sport is more popular than ever. With the right perspective, the Korean martial art can bridge cultural contrasts for both the instructor and the student. I am lucky enough to have participated in the sport across several countries over the last 25 years and these experiences have all taken part in shaping who I am and how I run my school today. In Iraq, Taekwondo is viewed as an escape from near-constant war. In South Korea, it’s a religion steeped in tradition. In the USA, it is viewed as a fitness business. It is my desire to share my Taekwondo journey in hopes that it highlights the key components of how I continue to learn and teach Taekwondo today.

¹ <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120614001058> Taekwondo becomes new technique for U.S. sports diplomacy

² <http://eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/sports-diplomacy> Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taekwondo_at_the_Summer_Olympics Taekwondo at the Summer Olympics

Taekwondo in Iraq is relatively young. It started in 1979 as a committee of the Martial Arts Federation and became independent in 1983⁴. Most of the Taekwondo schools that I am aware of are free of charge and are run by volunteers and support from the government. By providing sports facilities at no cost, it is a welcome distraction for kids and adults in a war torn country. It is my personal belief that Taekwondo can change a person's life as it has mine and can provide a positive environment, structured discipline, physical and mental strength and a healthy outlet for students.

For some context, I was born in 1977 and grew up in Babylon, Iraq in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War. When that war ended, another one started shortly after. Needless to say, life was not easy. Around the age of 12, I decided that I was sick of feeling unprepared to defend myself and weak in my own hometown. While there were a few different martial arts schools in the neighborhood, a few of my friends were taking Taekwondo classes in the neighborhood and really enjoyed it. I tried out for the Taekwondo class at the Babylon Sports Club in hopes of being able to protect myself against bullies. The try-out was intense and a couple of the other people trying out didn't make it through, not that I can blame them. My friend, for example, ended up with broken ribs during his "try-out." It's certainly a different experience than a USA parent would expect for their student today. Mr. Nabil (now Master Nabil, a 4th Dan), a brown belt at the time, pushed us constantly and encouraged us to work hard. He forced his students to take the sport seriously. We trained 5-6 days a week for 2-3 hours a day because we loved it and it provided us an escape from the daily toils of war. In addition to being mentally and physically stimulating, I really had a lot of fun. For serious

⁴ <http://ftp.worldtaekwondofederation.net/member-nation-activities/item/621-iraqi-taekwondo-troubled-past-bright-future/621-iraqi-taekwondo-troubled-past-bright-future> Iraqi Taekwondo: Troubled Past, Bright Future

students like myself, the competition for international tournaments was fierce and I was determined to make it.



Haydar MK Baqir, on right in white belt, watching a Taekwondo demonstration in Iraq

I attended a training camp and black belt test in Iraq led by Korean Grandmaster Kim Hee Sam (7th Dan). After earning my 1st Dan, I was more devoted than ever to excelling in the sport. For the next few years, Taekwondo was my focus and my hope for being able to travel around the world to compete. By age 17, I had qualified for the National Team. I was also under contract with the Babylon Sports Club to represent them even though I was often not paid during this contract. At the same time, I was obligated to serve the mandatory 3 year military service. For the next 18 months, I was focused on keeping physically fit and doing my civil duty. Eventually the paperwork came through that allowed me to be moved into a special National Team training group for Olympic hopefuls. For the last year and a half of my military service, I was able to move back home and continue training in Taekwondo. Occasionally, I would travel to Baghdad to train for months at a time with Grandmaster Kim Hee Sam.



Grandmaster Kim Hee Sam performing a concrete break demonstration while in Iraq



Iraqi National Team, ~1997, Haydar MK Baqir is in the 2nd row, 4th from the right

During this time, my mother, Nidhal Turki Abdulrahman, invited Grandmaster Kim and his daughter to dinner and he became a family friend. Eventually, Grandmaster Kim helped me to apply and receive a full scholarship for an Associate's Degree in Physical Education (Taekwondo Department) at Chunnam Techno College in Gokseong-Gun, South Korea. After a 6-month visa wait in Jordan, I finally received my visa and

flew to South Korea with nothing but \$200 in my pocket and hope for a better future through Taekwondo in my heart.

When I first arrived in South Korea, I worked 11-hour days for 3 months on an assembly line in a plastics company to earn money to travel to competitions. Eventually I moved into the campus dorms and shared a very packed room with 8 other Korean students. Not unexpectedly, I went through some culture shock as I tried to grow accustomed to life in Korea. I didn't speak any Korean or English and had a lot of issues with the differences in food. That being said, I made friends fast through a common passion for Taekwondo. It almost didn't matter that we had come from such different backgrounds because I was as devoted as anyone could be to the sport. It quickly became apparent to me that in Korea, Taekwondo was almost equivalent to a religion. People were often passionate about every aspect of it and the Kukkiwon's goal seemed to be to send Taekwondo "missionaries" all over the world to spread the gospel of the sport. It was also during my early years in Korea that I realized that a lot of the techniques that I had learned in Iraq were either outdated or wrong and it took practice and perseverance to correct my own bad habits. I was determined to make it - even against all odds.

I was coming from a nation with a violent past and an ominous future where my main concern was personal safety and survival, confident that Taekwondo could save me. Suddenly, I am immersed head-to-toe in a quickly developing country and the only way I know how to communicate is through the art. Luckily for me, Taekwondo knows no bounds.



Haydar MK Baqir, 1st Dan, demonstrating a kick outside of the rooftop container he lived in during the first few months of living in South Korea.

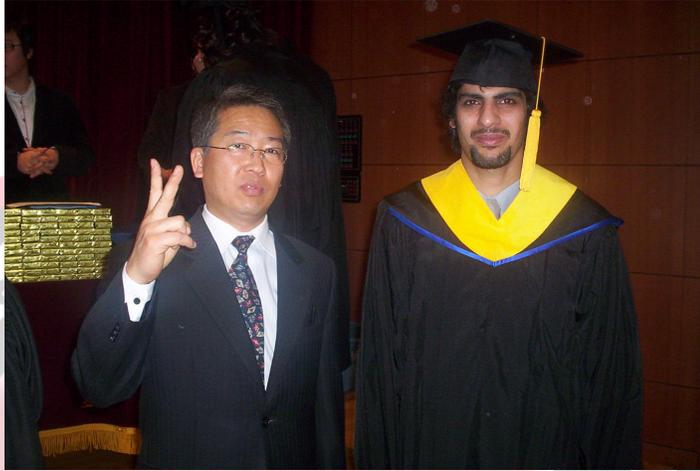
For most Koreans, Taekwondo is a natural and traditional part of life. At around age 5, it seems that a majority of kids are enrolled in the sport and will remain in it for several years. Students attend class 5-6 days a week usually for an hour at a time in private schools called hagwons. In the Taekwondo hagwons, it is easy to see differences between the serious students and those that are there for fun. Often times, the serious students would be moved into their own classes to focus on intense training for competitions. It isn't unusual to see students receive up to 3rd or 4th Poom/Dan before age 16. Needless to say, competitions are fierce and pride is always on the line. Taekwondo tends to bring out both the best and the worst characteristics in people and I learned to use it as a way to build trust with my Korean Taekwondo family. You can always tell how a person is feeling by how present they are in the class. For example, a normally focused student might be unusually quiet while they think through something that angered them during the day. In this way, Taekwondo is a healthy outlet for students of all ages.



Haydar MK Baqir, Temple Entrance behind Choonam Techno College

As I progressed in my personal training and received my 2nd Dan, I also started teaching Taekwondo while working on my Bachelor's and then Master's degree in Physical Science (Taekwondo Department) at Chodang University in Muan, South Korea. During a tournament, I met Master Kim Chang Moo, 7th Dan and he invited me to be the sparring coach at his hagwon in the southern part of the country in a city called Suncheon. He offered me a room in his house or a room in his gym along with free food a livable salary for the first time in my life. It was at this point that I realized that Taekwondo could be my future career. During these years, I watched and learned from how Master Kim ran his business. He was focused on keeping people happy more than some of the other hagwons and instructed me to do the same. For example, if the majority of the kids didn't like being hit during sparring practice, we would focus more on sparring techniques than on sparring itself. It was certainly a different approach to

running a martial arts business that I had seen in the past. The focus at this school was on keeping students happy to retain their business. It was a lesson that I would carry with me to the USA.



Friend and Haydar MK Baqir at graduation from Chodang University in Muan, South Korea

During the early 2000's, I also started teaching a Taekwondo class specifically for the Western foreigners that lived there while teaching English. The primary drivers for this class were that the foreigners wanted exposure to a Korean tradition and also a way to keep fit in a culture that prided itself on over-indulgence on food and drink. This exposure to the Western approach to martial arts would turn out to be an important one.



Master Haydar Baqir's (4th from right) Foreigner TKD class in Suncheon, South Korea and future wife, Cassandra Walker (4th from left)



Master Haydar Baqir, 2008

In 2009, I moved to Phoenix, Arizona in the USA with my fiancée, Cassandra and we were married shortly after arriving. My first experience with a US Taekwondo school came from a volunteer experience at Master Young Choi's school in Peoria, Arizona. I was happy to have an opportunity to work for a Korean Master in the US. During my few months of experience in his school, the Western focus of martial arts primarily as a work out became clear. On average, the students there and in other US schools train about 3 times a week for an hour a class. From the business perspective, I learned how to

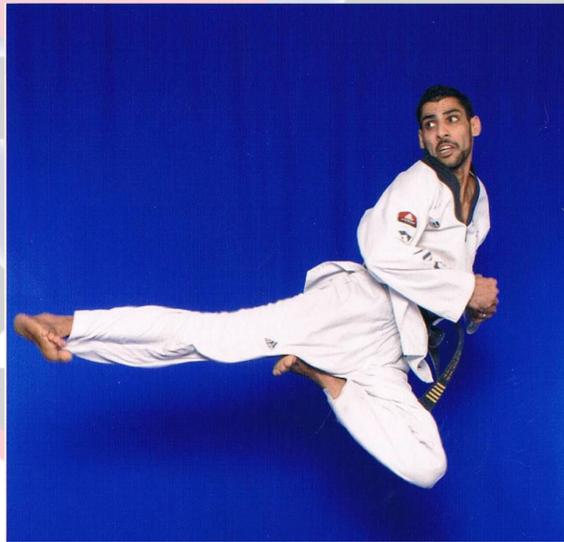
continue to motivate students and keep the classes interesting. I saw the financial impact on schools that make the parents sign contracts and pre-pay versus students that attend month-to-month with no obligation. I also respected the focus on teaching the traditional roots of the sport as well as the students that had a desire to pursue their training as a serious sport. One of the most important things I stressed during my first few years in the USA was the need to teach and perfect the basics first.

For the next 3 years, I worked at a Taekwondo school in Litchfield Park, Arizona. Unlike the other schools that I had worked in, this school was owned by someone who was not a Taekwondo practitioner but a businessman whose kids had an interest in the sport. When the decisions regarding a school are made with the business-mind first and foremost, it may not mesh with the way a person that has devoted their life to the sport would run the school. It was apparent with the frequent changes in Taekwondo styles and instructors in this school that an important piece of the puzzle was missing and it would take me a few years to determine what that was. That being said, the time at this school taught me a lot about how to balance the needs of the business with the desires of the students, parents and instructors. I quickly learned that it was impossible to please everyone 100% of the time, no matter how hard I tried. I also learned how important it was for communication with everyone to be professional, consistent and courteous.

There are a lot of different martial arts schools in the United States and I would argue that most of the general public does not know the difference between schools that teach karate, Taekwondo or some other owner-defined mish mash of martial arts. What I like to tell parents is that Taekwondo is both a mental and physical workout. As lifeinkorea.com defines it, “Taekwondo combines all the elements of ones body, mind

and life with a result that is greater than the sum of the individual parts.” For the standard student, it’s a way to stay fit, have fun and learn what impact dedication and perseverance can make. For the serious student, it can be a life saver, a path to a career or even a path to becoming an international athlete.

In 2012, my wife and I started our own school in Goodyear, Arizona and called it Master Haydar’s Black Belt Academy. We now have the freedom to run the school the way we think is best. First and foremost – our community is our *family*. We celebrate the accomplishments of the students and their families and we support them during troubled times. Our motto is “Confidence for Life” and we truly believe that this is something that kids in this country need. Within the class, I try to teach the students to be kind and strong inside and outside of the gym. I reinforce the importance of respect for school, teachers, parents and other students.



Master Haydar MK Baqir, 2010

We feel like we have a good balance between the needs of the business and the needs of the students. We are as flexible as we can be when dealing with a large group of

customers but I try to stay true to myself and my roots. What drives me is still the passion I have for the sport and how it can transform someone's life. Competing priorities, ever-changing home situations and parental support are challenges that are common in this business. At this point, I am always ready for anything and I am willing to make a change when needed. After becoming a father in 2013, I've also learned to slow down a bit and to be more understanding and patient with everyone.

The future of Taekwondo looks different depending on the country you are in. For example, the future of the sport in Iraq looks quite different from that in South Korea, as you can imagine. In Iraq, athletes and sport officials are frequent targets of threats for ransom or sectarian violence⁵. In the mid-2000s, 15 Taekwondo athletes were traveling by car to a Jordanian training camp between Fallujah and Ramadi. They were kidnapped and ultimately executed and their remains were discovered in 2009. **If I was still in Iraq, I likely would have been part of this group.** A day doesn't go by that I don't feel lucky to have pursued my dreams in safety.

The Iraqi Taekwondo Federation president, Jamal Abed Al Kareem was gunned down in his office in the National Olympic Committee building. A month later, two additional members of the federation leadership were also killed. An Iraqi soccer referee, a tennis coach and two players and a national level volleyball competitor were also abducted during that time.

Since then, however, things have started to look better for the future of the martial art in my war-town, Middle Eastern country. Taekwondo is now the second most popular sport in the country (following soccer) and is gaining more credibility. As of 2013, Iraq

⁵ http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2007-06-16-athletes-found_N.htm Remains of kidnapped Iraqi tae kwon do team found

has 200+ clubs and more than half a million participants, including both men and women.⁶ Dr. Mahmood Shukur Saleh Al Shalaf, the 10th Iraq TKD Federation president, has several focused goals for the future of Iraqi Taekwondo. Since he was a member of the 1985 National Team, he understands the importance of improving the technical levels through quality coaches and referees. He has organized training courses and is focused on gaining international referees in the near future. Additionally, black belts in the country are being increasingly legitimized through Kukkiwon accreditation. His optimistic goal for the future is Olympic Gold for Iraq.

In South Korea, Taekwondo has a complex 2000+ year old history and now claims over 8 million Poom/Dan (Black Belt level) practitioners. Taekwondo is now in the top 8 of the most affiliated sports in the Olympics³. The World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) started the Taekwondo Peace Corps in 2008 to advertise the “hope and dreams of the youth of the world⁷.” The program, which is paying special attention to the African countries, requires significant financial support from public and private sponsors in training world-class athletes. In addition to the Taekwondo Peace Corps, the WTF would like to tackle the issue of gender equality – especially in developing countries. Some have even claimed that women would have a biological advantage in the sport because they are naturally more flexible than men. Additionally, physical strength is becoming

⁶ <http://ftp.worldtaekwondofederation.net/member-nation-activities/item/621-iraqi-taekwondo-troubled-past-bright-future/621-iraqi-taekwondo-troubled-past-bright-future> Iraqi Taekwondo: Troubled Past, Bright Future

⁷ <http://www.insidethegames.biz/bigread/1011807-future-of-taekwondo-in-good-hands-as-appointment-of-ioc-member-aicha-garad-ali-targets-gender-equality> Future of taekwondo in good hands as appointment of IOC member Aïcha Garad Ali targets gender equality, 03 December 2012

decreasingly important in Taekwondo and other martial arts. For example, looking at the success of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu fighters in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has proven that size does not guarantee a win.

In the United States, Taekwondo has been increasingly associated with MMA fighters' stand-up fighting dominance. The sport's spinning kicks are making a comeback - especially within arenas such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). "Fighters such as Anthony Pettis, Cung Le and Junior Dos Santos have all used either a spinning-heel kick or a high risk flying kick to finish a fight⁸." I've even had the personal privilege of training with Benson Henderson, a UFC fighter and Taekwondo black belt that trains out of our local MMA gym. Georges St. Pierre (or GSP), arguably the #1 UFC welterweight fighter of all time, claims that Taekwondo has the best spinning back kick⁹. All of this attention is aiding in the rapid growth of Taekwondo within the USA. According to the Kukkiwon's official website¹⁰, there are approximately 4,000 Taekwondo gyms and almost 300,000 certified black belts in the country. It is now popular enough with such a diverse talent pool that is time for instructors to take the sport to the next level. It should no longer be considered just a workout fad but be something in which professional fighters can be developed into Olympic medalists. It is my hope that my school can do just that... train passionate and serious students whose lives can be permanently changed for the better because of Taekwondo.

⁸ <http://www.moosin.com/2014/06/mma-is-the-future-of-taekwondo/> MMA Is The Future of TaeKwonDo

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9JYxsvPErA> Georges St Pierre: Joe Rogan has the best spinning back kick he's ever seen

¹⁰

<http://www.kukkiwon.or.kr/front/eng/main.action;jsessionid=SGua5bUlgNcQNf8nvxKZi6mAaHLdb0HwvSY5tnYZTpdra5wqlwKnDMCBS1A8Hz0>



MHBBA students after competing in the 2013 Phoenix Open tournament

In conclusion, the culture of Taekwondo is very different depending on your cultural perspective. In Iraq, the Korean martial art started as a distraction from life during war and is now turning into a serious competitive sport. From my early experiences in Taekwondo within my home country, I learned that it can literally save lives and give purpose to life. In South Korea, traditional values and a religious-like following have helped the sport's popularity explode. With its admission as a full-medal sport in the Olympics, Taekwondo is now more than ever on the international stage. The Kukkiwon hopes to use this recognition to spread the gospel of the sport to every nation on the globe. From my decade-plus in South Korea, I learned to value and respect the heritage and history of the art. In the United States, a Taekwondo business has a lot of competition to people that may not truly understand what makes it so special. It is my job to pass on what I have learned through my 25+ year journey by using the sport as a cultural bridge. I truly believe that Taekwondo is a means of communicating across societies and socioeconomic statuses. The desire to stay healthy physically and mentally within a community of like-minded people is something that knows no boundaries.