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Citation

Al-Tikriti, N. (2005). From Showcaseto Basket Case Education in Iraq. *Isim Review*, 15(1), 24-25. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16969>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

From Showcase to Basket Case

Education in Iraq

NABIL AL-TIKRITI

Times are hard for professors in Iraq today—very hard. Since the US/UK “coalition of the willing” invaded the country in March 2003 and forcibly evicted the country’s sovereign government, an estimated 10-15% of Iraq’s 16,500 instructors spread across some 20 universities have left the country. In addition to facing bitterly disappointed expectations of US institutional support in the past 20 months, professors have been forced to cope with widespread looting, targeted violence, campus politicization, and institutional uncertainty. Although some actors remain optimistic about a future for a higher education sector liberated from a stifling and highly centralized state control, most remain apprehensive about the same sector liberated from sources of funding, professors, and campus civility.

Times were not always so bad. Iraq’s universities were a proud part of the national patrimony from the 1950’s to the 1980’s, and were widely considered among the region’s best throughout this period. Observers recall a vibrant and exciting 1970’s, when the university sector engaged in international research ventures, published top-flight in the humanities and the sciences, surveyed the country’s unrivalled archaeological sites, catalogued Iraq’s impressive manuscript holdings, and sent its best graduates to earn Ph.D.’s at the foremost research universities in Europe and North America. Many of those internationally educated graduates returned home in the 1980’s and provided the scientific expertise needed to build the state’s advanced arms programmes in that time of war.

Although the growth and elaboration of higher education continued through much of the 1980’s, the twin effects of state Saddamization and compulsory fiscal restraint during the long and difficult Iran-Iraq War began to sap the energy and vibrancy of the universities. By the end of the decade, the good times had clearly passed as state monitoring of campus politics began to negatively affect retention of academic talent. Yet, by the war’s end education professionals could still hope to be optimistic about a long-awaited post-war future.

The beginning of the end for Iraqi higher education dates to the government’s ill-advised hostile takeover of Kuwait in 1990. After the international community mobilized to enforce the illegality of an unprovoked and unsanctioned invasion of one sovereign country by another, Iraq found itself facing a crushing sanctions regime and hefty reparation requirements vis-a-vis Kuwait. Iraqis initially expected to endure a few months of financial difficulty until the UN Security Council disarmament protocols could be carried out. Instead, the sanctions regime continued for nearly thirteen years, primarily due to US and UK insistence.

Trapped in a formerly affluent society now forced to prioritize procurement of basic necessities, Iraq’s universities faced gradual decline throughout the 1990’s. Higher education suffered not only from internationally enforced neglect, but the sector also found itself physically and intellectually cut off from the rest of the world. Under sanctions, international exchanges ended completely, journal subscriptions were prohibited, high technology purchases were forbidden, and spare parts for previously purchased equipment were halted. Famously, even pencils were embargoed due to the “dual use” capability of lead. Combined with the continuing strictures on intellectual curiosity spring-

Iraq’s academic professionals continue to face an uphill struggle to maintain standards following years of sanctions and months of social chaos. Although some may remain optimistic about a future free of centralized ministerial oversight and autocratic governance, many more feel bitterness for the lack of international support offered since the beginning of the US/UK invasion and subsequent occupation. As with so much of post-war Iraq, the higher education sector is yet another area where US military, political, and bureaucratic intervention has proven more damaging than revitalizing.

ing from an increasingly apprehensive and insecure authoritarian ruling elite, many of the country’s most talented academics found the situation unbearable and emigrated. An estimated 10,000 instructors left the country in the 1990’s.¹ In spite of such adversity, those professors who remained managed to maintain academic standards through increasingly desperate forms of improvisation. For example, in order to keep up with scientific advances, medical school instructors annually obtained from Jordan a single copy of relevant medical textbooks, which

were then provided to photocopiers for class distribution. Although scientific research ground to a halt, university instruction continued.

Looting strips the campuses

The final *coup de grace* for Iraq’s academe occurred in the chaos which followed the fall of the Ba’athist government in April 2003. Expressing anger, frustration, and consternation about a suddenly fallen state sector, various elements took privatization of government institutions—like universities—into their own hands with a wave of mass looting. It has been suggested that officials carried out some of the looting to erase a contentious past. Although that may be true for several sensitive state facilities, the university looters seem to have largely consisted of urban poor. While the effect of the looting was spread unevenly throughout the country, the damage to many facilities was devastating. Various library facilities were looted and/or burned, as were much of the holdings of such cultural repositories and research institutions as the Baghdad Museum, National Archives, Awqaf Library, Iraqi Academy of Sciences, and Bayt al-Hikma. The looting of campus offices destroyed much of the institutional memory of Iraq’s universities. Student records, personnel records, faculty files, and many other sorts of records which provide the “nuts and bolts” of education administration were lost — as they were in so many other sectors.² To Iraqis, the looting of April 2003 was only the most recent act of a long-term conspiracy to “keep Iraq down” rather than an unfortunate example of “stuff happening” when an authoritarian regime collapses. As one Iraqi saying had it when the government fell and the former president disappeared, “now the student has left—and the master has arrived.”

University life in occupied Iraq

Iraqi professors, students, and administrators had reason to hope that their situation might improve. Unfortunately, the period following the establishment of the US/UK occupation can largely be characterized as “one step forward, two steps backward” and has only served to confirm Iraqi suspicions concerning US motives. The anticipated reconstruction support from US institutions never materialized on a scale capable of restoring the tattered glory of Iraq’s universities due partly to policy choice, and partly to circumstance.

The Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has calculated that \$1.2 billion is needed for university rehabilitation. Against that need, the ministry has been allocated approximately \$20 million in benefits from USAID contracts awarded to American universities, and \$20 million from other international donors.³ Not only is that amount

tiny compared to the estimated required amount, it is also a drop in the bucket against the \$18.6 billion total funds approved by the US Congress for Iraqi reconstruction in November 2003. In one sense, it has made little difference—only an estimated 20% of such reconstruction funds had been disbursed by June 2004 in any case.⁴

From the beginning, US administrators allocated funding in accordance with short term US interests rather than long-term Iraqi interests. The Republican party apparatchiks sent by the Bush Administration to staff the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) did the best they could, but the strictures of neo-conservative policy goals designed to “spread democracy” seriously undermined any efforts to remedy the situation at hand. For example, it was felt to be of the highest priority to ensure that every primary school student in the country received new textbooks, complete with USAID-approved re-interpretations of Iraqi, Arab, and Islamic history. Combined with a widely-advertised initiative to leave no primary or secondary school unpainted, the pre-university sector received an estimated 7-8 times more funding support than higher education from the US government and the World Bank—betraying a prioritization of the mass indoctrination of Iraqi youth through new textbooks over the restoration of Iraq’s regional pre-eminence in higher education.⁵

As with other Iraqi state assets, there was briefly some discussion of setting up private “international” educational institutions to compete with, and perhaps supplant, state higher education facilities. However, like so much else that has been envisioned since the spring of 2003, this idea has yet to materialize beyond a couple of pilot efforts. These institutions, the “American Liberal Arts University of Iraq” in Arbil and the “College of Democracy,” are both located in Northern Iraq and are closely identified with former CPA Higher Education Advisor John Agrestos.

Another priority of US administrators appears to have been providing corporate welfare to US companies in the form of reconstruction contracts. This mode of funding has so far led to a uniquely American brand of corporate corruption, whereby US taxpayers pay top dollar to US companies for basic jobs like painting primary schools. In turn, the US companies hire local subcontractors at pennies on the dollar to physically fulfill the contracted work. The leakage implied in such a contracting protocol would rival any patronage system of the type routinely condemned by World Bank and IMF investigators in less wealthy societies. Although this sort of structure has been somewhat less in evidence in the higher education sector than in other sectors, the overall effect has been to bleed the US economy while robbing Iraqis of sovereignty over their own institutions.

One of the most damaging CPA decisions concerning the universities sprung from the wider US goal of “de-Ba’athification.” In May 2003, newly-appointed CPA head Paul Bremer announced a comprehensive policy of de-Ba’athification for state employees above the middle ranks. Even prior to Bremer’s announcement, Iraqi public opinion—and a couple of targeted assassinations—forced many unpopular campus Ba’athist apparatchiks into hiding. However, after this wide-ranging decree, public education institutions found themselves robbed of much of their best talent, as CPA advisor and education commissar Andrew Erdmann oversaw the expulsion of an estimated 1,400 university instructors for Ba’ath party membership.⁶ Although many of these professionals were later rehired, the institutional damage has been considerable.

Research professionals associated with the former government’s weapons development programme found themselves detained by US officials in prison camps. The most notable example is Amer al-Sa’adi, an Iraqi scientist who became famous before the war for denying, accurately, that Iraq had any weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Anticipating a quick release once Iraq’s lack of WMD became known, Dr. al-Sa’adi turned himself in to US forces immediately after Baghdad’s fall. He remains in detention, and repeated calls for his release through an international petition drive led by his German wife, who survived the August 2003 Canal Hotel bombing while arguing his case to UN officials, have to date failed to sway US authorities.

In addition to the physical damage endured in the wave of looting and the staff depletion caused by Bremer’s decree and other US actions, the universities have faced serious issues of campus and personal security. Since March 2003, at least 200 academics have faced violent attacks, the fate of 75 kidnapped instructors remains unknown, and at least 14 professors have been murdered in a targeted fashion. In light



Iraqi students pass a U.S. soldier at Baghdad University, 6 July 2003.

PHOTO BY FALEH KHEIBER / © REUTERS, 2003

of such danger, it should come as no surprise that an estimated 1,600-2,000 university instructors have left the country.⁷ Those professors remaining behind have been obliged to face the inevitable politicization of campus life that followed the collapse of a system designed to carefully channel political energies towards centrally-mandated goals for more than a generation. Campuses quickly became arenas for intense political competition between groups affiliated with various factions of the Iraqi political scene. While public political discussion was a welcome change for many in the new order, such politicization has proved disruptive to campus civility and intimidated many. A recent academic visitor from Jordan was warned against visiting campuses because there were “spies” who might inform on the stranger’s presence.

Against all odds, Iraq’s university staff carries on: physical plants have been repaired, new structures of institutional governance have been established, and library collections have been re-organized with the addition of some book shipments. However, such activities continue in the face of a shoestring budget, meagre international support, and a myriad of security problems. The combination of staff shortfall and financial constraints has grown so dire in recent months that 134 Ph.D. programmes have been eliminated throughout the university system.⁸ As a sign of just how precarious the security situation has become for government officials, the Ministry of Education was hit by a car bomb in the first week of November 2004. In light of all the obstacles, in some sense it is remarkable that higher education continues at all in Iraq. The fact that it does is a tribute to the courage and pride of Iraq’s educators.

Notes

1. LaFranchi, “Iraq Losing its Best and Brightest,” Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, http://www.iwpr.net/archive/ipm/ipm_186.html.
2. For an early overview of the state of Iraq’s post-war higher education sector and intellectual life, see Keith Watenpaugh, Edouard Méténier, Jens Hanssen, and Hala Fattah, “Opening the Doors: Intellectual Life and Academic Conditions in Post-War Baghdad,” July 15, 2003, http://www.h-net.org/about/press/opening_doors/opening_doors.pdf.
3. Christina Asquith, “With Little More Than Hope, Iraqi Colleges Try to Rebuild,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 13, 2004, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i49/49a03701.htm>.
4. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “Mistakes Loom Large as Handover Nears,” *Washington Post*, June 20, 2004.
5. Asquith, “With Little More Than Hope.”
6. Ibid.
7. LaFranchi, “Iraq Losing its Best and Brightest.”
8. Asquith, “With Little More Than Hope.”

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