

## **Comment: Conflict Foils Change in Schools and Universities**

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Extraordinary difficulties – and a few glimmers of hope – in Iraq's schools and universities. Iraq once had one of the best educational systems in the Middle East. Baghdad and Mosul were thriving university and intellectual centres, and school enrolment and literacy rates were high.

War changed that – first the decade-long conflict with Iran, then the first Gulf War, and finally the effects of United Nations sanctions from 1991. The school system began to collapse, and enrolment fell as many children, functioning in survival mode like the adults around them, were forced to earn money rather than study. Within a decade, only 53 per cent of children were enrolled in schools, according to the US Agency for International Development.

By the time the US-led Coalition overthrew Saddam Hussein's government in April 2003, Iraq's schools and its educational system were in shambles.

With Saddam gone, though, there were rays of hope: Enrolment began to climb again, while the United Nations children's agency UNICEF, the US government, Iraq's education ministry and other powerful actors promised to rebuild thousands of crumbling schools and improve the country's education.

Once again, war arrived. The chaos of conflict has disrupted the day-to-day life of schools and universities and prevented substantive change in the education system.

The lack of security has also made statistics difficult to obtain. UNICEF's last report on literacy in Iraq, in 2004, estimated that 74 per cent of people could read and write.

Iraq's educational system no longer uses the heavily politicised Baathist curriculum, but the system is still as centralised as it was under Saddam. The education ministry in Baghdad decides which subjects will be taught, which schools will be rebuilt and other important priorities. In Iraqi Kurdistan, these decisions are, for the most part, made by the regional government's education ministry.

Local education directorates filter requests from schools to the ministry, but education, like other governance efforts, is taking a back seat to the more pressing issue of security.

The conflict is being fought on the streets of Iraq and its once-flourishing capital, Baghdad, affecting every aspect of life and effectively halting governance there. In the capital, IWPR correspondents report, the lack of law and order is destroying education. Teachers are refusing to show up to work because of the security situation; schools, particularly in mixed Sunni-Shia neighbourhoods, shut down for months on end; and pupils are pulled out of school by their parents.

In Basra, according to IWPR reporters in this southern region, education officials are slowly trying to rebuild schools, which are under pressure from returnees and Shia Iraqis from other regions who have flocked to the south. At Basra University, meanwhile, students affiliated with Shia militias are using these dangerous connections to threaten teaching staff.

In spite of the difficulties, the picture is not entirely grim. Mud schools built by tribesmen in al-Samawa in southwestern Iraq are giving their children an opportunity to study, although the government is ignoring their requests for more durable modern facilities. In Kirkuk, two significant ethnic groups – Turkoman and Kurds - can finally study in their own languages following years of persecution under Saddam.

Iraq's brightest spot continues to be the Kurdistan region, which will soon be home to the American University of Iraq. An comment piece argues that the northern region must improve its curricula and teaching style if it is to become a centre of higher education.

Meanwhile, young Kurds are so eager to study English that some are paying hundreds of dollars to study at private centres.

Students say the Kurdish educational authorities have removed references to Saddam and the Baathists from teaching materials, but have not take any other steps to modernise textbooks and educational methods.

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**Location:** Middle East  
Palestine  
Israel  
Syria

**Topic:** Special Report: Education in Iraq

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