

## **Foreign Students Flock to Iraqi Kurdish Colleges**

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Kurdish students from Iran and Syria are escaping the troubles by studying in northern Iraq.

Kurdish students living in Iraq's neighbours are flocking to universities in the Kurdish areas to escape repression at home and to benefit from the opportunities they say the region offers.

The University of Sulaimaniyah alone has so far accepted more than 110 Kurdish students from neighbouring countries, mainly Iran and Syria, under a programme that reserves five per cent of all places at Iraqi Kurdish universities for high school graduates educated elsewhere.

The foreign students receive free tuition and accommodation and a 100 US dollar allowance each term.

Thirty-year old Farzeen, a first year student at Sulaimaniyah's media college from the Iranian town of Saqiz, said education in Iran is expensive in Iran and freedom of speech limited. "You can't express any political beliefs or air your views freely or you end up in jail, especially if you are a Kurd," said Farzeen.

Bayan, an Iranian Kurd who agreed to talk to IWPR on the condition her full name would not be used so as to protect her family, said she came to Sulaimaniyah after facing discrimination at home.

"I got high marks in high school, but my university place went to the daughter of a member of the Basij, the paramilitary reservists. There was no point in complaining," Bayan said, adding although she was accepted by a private art college in Tehran she couldn't afford the 800 dollar tuition fees.

Mnar Nisi was in the fourth year of a philosophy degree at Damascus University when he chose to leave Syria for political reasons, despite the fact no Iraqi Kurdistan universities offer courses in philosophy

"So now I'm back in first year, studying political science," said Nisi.

Despite this, he has no complaints. "Syria has been mistreating Kurdish students for years. We're just lucky there is a place that accepts us, and we can continue studying."

In the university's cafe, Muhammed Hamo, a first year student in at the media college, sits with two friends, one a Kurd from Iran, the other a native of Sulaimaniyah.

Hamo is one of several Syrian Kurds who fled Damascus after protesting at the authorities' violent suppression of a Kurdish uprising in the towns of Qamishli and Hasaka in March 2004.

He and some 500 other Kurdish students were arrested after police broke up a peaceful demonstration at Damascus University organized earlier this year to protest the deaths in Qamishli. He was initially hospitalised after being beaten by the police, then, following his discharge, was arrested and spent three weeks in prison.

As soon as he was released, Hamo fled to Iraq.

“I cannot fully describe the injustice and violence perpetrated by the Syrian Baathist Party against the Kurds,” said Hamo. “Here we are free. The government is Kurdish, and we study in Kurdish.”

Jawidan, a fifth year medical student at Damascus University, didn’t get off so lightly. He says that following the demonstration he was arrested and tortured by Syrian intelligence, then held imprisoned for 50 days.

“They threatened to expel me and said we were criminals for betraying Syria and the Arabs,” he said.

Syria’s Kurdish political parties tried to send Jawidan and several other students to Iraq or other foreign countries to escape the violence and finish their education. But after two students were arrested applying for passports, the remainder fled illegally across the border into Iraq.

Salahaddin University in the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Erbil has already accepted 120 Syrian Kurds. Though it has also taken in numerous Kurdish students from Iran, of the 600 applications it received this year, the university could only find a place for 70.

Not surprisingly, demand for university places from Kurdish students living outside Iraq look set to continue growing. “I want to study in Kurdish, to live freely as a Kurd and stay here,” said one Iranian student.

Talar Nadir is an IWPR trainee in Baghdad.

**Location:** [Syria](#)  
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