

Iraq's Scholars Reluctant to Return

The continuing shortage of academics is damaging higher education throughout the country. Zahra, a doctoral candidate studying immune-system diseases, shook her head in disappointment when she saw the list of professors who were supposed to review her thesis.

Three had fled the country. While one promised to attend her defence of her thesis, another was unable to make it because of the security situation.

Zahra, 40, who received her PhD two months ago, did most of the work on her own. She doesn't blame her professors - one left Iraq after receiving a bloodstained bullet in an envelope together with a note which read, "You're wanted because you are a scientist."

"I thought that the good security situation might encourage the professors to return to Iraq," said Zahra, who did not want her real name to be used. "On the contrary, some are still fleeing the country, and the universities are still suffering from a shortage of lecturers."

Widespread threats against Iraqi university staff have all but stripped the country of its intellectual core, particularly in Baghdad.

According to the country's higher education ministry, 240 lecturers were killed from 2003 to October 2007.

Approximately 2,000 academics have fled the country, according to Tariq al-Bakaa, a former minister of higher education who served under the 2004 government of the then prime minister Ayad Allawi.

Most have fled to Jordan, Gulf States, Libya and Syria, where some have established the Syrian International University for Science and Technology.

Many others cannot find work or are struggling to make ends meet in their countries of refuge, but are wary of returning.

The wife of a pharmacology lecturer who recently came back from Syria said her husband stayed behind while she checked out the situation.

"I was fed up of living in Syria," she said. "I came back to Iraq with my sons to ascertain that the situation is secure before my husband returns. He works at a university there [in Syria], but he wants to be at his own university, with his students in Iraq."

Despite the recent improvement in the security situation in the capital, academics both inside Iraq and abroad say that scholars who fled intimidation are unlikely to return in the near future.

Al-Bakaa, now a visiting scholar from Harvard University, is researching the state of Iraq's educational system and threats against academics.

"You won't return to a country where you will be killed," said al-Bakaa, who left for the United States in October 2005 through the US-based Scholars at Risk Network.

According to one of al-Bakaa's reports, approximately 60 per cent of the murdered academics held PhDs, came from Baghdad and taught at universities.

No one has been tried in any of these murder cases, he said.

"The violence targeted the best of the professors," said Kawther Ahmed Fadel, a 19-year-old student at al-Mustansiria University in Baghdad.

"Not a week goes by without an announcement that a professor or other teaching staff member has been killed."

There are indications that Iraqi scholars continue to face risks.

Of the 21 academics currently seeking refuge outside their countries through the Scholars at Risk Network, 11 are from Iraq.

Six pleas have been made since September last year, and the latest appeal was listed on January 8.

The ongoing intimidation threatens to drive out the last of the country's academics.

The higher education system has long been in decline.

Until the Eighties, Iraq was regarded as the centre of academia in the Arab world. However, the late Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein cut educational funding as he beefed up the military budget during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980 to 1988.

Many of Iraq's top professors fled the country under Saddam's Baathist government and as a result of the United Nations-backed sanctions of the Nineties.

In 2003, the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority instituted "de-Baathification" policies, under which party members - including 1,000 lecturers and professors - were fired from their jobs.

According to al-Bakaa, a former Baathist who left the party two decades ago, the government had to shut

down 153 academic specialisations because there were no longer any experts in those fields.

While all academic fields have been affected, “the medical schools have been totally devastated by the lack of expertise”, he said.

“Teaching standards are deteriorating at Iraqi universities because of the lack of professors,” said Fadel. “Most of the lecturers obtained their master’s or doctoral degrees only recently.”

The ministry has tried to compensate for the shortage by giving teaching jobs to people with higher degrees - 7,900 master’s degree holders and just over 1,000 PhDs were appointed between 2005 and 2007

But the number of new lecturers and their level of knowledge are insufficient to fill the void, academics say - particularly since the ministry announced in December that it wants to establish nine new universities across Iraq.

According to ministry spokesman Basil al-Khateeb, the government is encouraging university staff to return home.

Parliament is currently debating legislation that would raise lecturers’ salaries and benefits by 200 per cent, and provide additional perks such as life insurance and housing.

Most Iraqi professors currently make anywhere between 350,000 and two million dinars a month, or 290 to 1,645 US dollars.

Khateeb said Iraq badly needs its best and brightest scholars to return, particularly those who are now teaching in western universities.

“There is a verbal call out for professors to return to Iraq,” he said. “At conferences and meetings in Iraqi Kurdistan and abroad, the minister keeps telling them to come back. Some want to return, but others are hesitant because they’re worried about the security situation.

“We will welcome them if they want to return.”

But many academics argue that the government and the ministry are not doing enough to support them.

“The ministry should be more serious about bringing back the universities’ teaching staff,” said Ibrahim Mohammed Ahmed, a political science professor in Baghdad.

“I don’t mean that they should only address security,” he . Many professors who fled the country for fear of

their lives find that they are treated better [abroad] than their colleagues inside Iraq. That's why they don't want to come back, in addition to the security threat."

Some of the names in this story were changed because of security concerns.

Zaineb Naji is an IWPR reporter in Baghdad. IWPR Iraq editor Mariwan Hama-Saeed contributed to this report.

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