

Kurdistan Bolstered by Influx of Arab Academics

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Higher education in Baghdad and other troubled cities dealt a blow as lecturers flee sectarian violence for the Kurdish north.

Ali Abdul-Wahab, 50, a Shia, used to teach engineering at Baghdad Technical University, but then one day he started to receive threats from Sunni radicals who control his Sunni-majority neighborhood of al-Jamia'a.

"I can't live or work here anymore," said the lecturer, two of whose colleagues have been killed by extremists. He decided to leave the capital for Sulaimaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan, where he now teaches at the city's university

Academic life in Baghdad and other strife-torn cities has almost come to a halt because many academic staff have either gone abroad or moved to safer provinces - some 200 lecturers and assistant lecturers have left the capital for the relatively-stable Kurdish north.

Insurgents seem to have declared war on the country's educational elite - 280 lecturers and other academics have been killed since Saddam was ousted in April 2003. There were more casualties this week, when insurgents attacked Mustansiriyah University, killing at least 70 students and staff members and wounding 138, in the deadliest violence in the country so far this year.

Last October, militants declared that lecturers and students would be targeted unless they stayed away from their colleges. For some weeks, the number of students dropped dramatically. Slowly, though, they started to come back, however the attacks and threats did not stop.

In November, the dean of the College of Economics was assassinated. And then a few days later, a number of higher education ministry employees were abducted in broad daylight by gunmen masquerading as ministry of interior forces.

Universities remain open but are more or less deserted. For although campuses are guarded by police and army, staff and students still feel like easy prey for militants once they leave the premises.

Abdul-Wahab rented a house for his family in Sulaimaniyah and says he settled down well, "I feel comfortable working here. Colleagues trust me fully, and relations between Arab and Kurdish lecturers are wonderful."

Some faculties in Baghdad are on the edge of closing down because almost all the lecturers have left. At the College of Pharmacology, staff numbers have fallen from 12 to two, with missing personnel replaced by recently graduated teachers.

Salahaddin University in Erbil was for many years the only university in the northern part of the country. After the Kurdish uprising in March 1991, when the northern provinces of Sulaimaniya, Erbil and Dohuk acquired semi-autonomous status, two new universities were opened in Sulaimaniyah and Dohuk.

The new Kurdish universities mainly depended on local and expat Kurdish academics because they had no connection with universities in the rest of Iraq.

After 2003, the relocation of Arab lecturers reinvigorated academic life there, prompting the Kurdish education authorities to expand several colleges to meet growing local demand for higher education.

"If those [Arab] lecturers hadn't come, teaching at Sulaimaniyah University would have been problematic," said Aras Dartash, dean of the College of Economy and Administration. At this college alone, there are 11 lecturers and assistant lecturers from central and southern Iraq.

He said they were a great help, especially in supervising masters and doctoral students.

The Kurdistan Regional Government seeks to encourage Arab lecturers to relocate by offering them financial incentives. Individuals are handed bonuses of 300,000 Iraqi dinars (200 US dollars) while those who bring their families receive an additional 500,000 dinars as a housing subsidy.

But there is a downside to the trend, and not only the obvious one that higher education in other parts of the country suffers.

Many young Kurdish university students have a poor grasp of Arabic because during the period of autonomous rule in the Nineties many studied only in Kurdish.

Aryan Qadir, a student at the College of Economy and Administration, failed a course in a topic that an Arab lecturer taught. "We know these lecturers are experienced but we don't understand them because they teach in Arabic," he said.

Dartash defends the employment of Arab lecturers, insisting that only some undergraduates are affected by language difficulties and translators will soon be employed to assist them. Other colleges overcome this problem by teaching in English.

However, it's not only language that's a source of trouble. "Some Arab lecturers bring up political and sectarian issues that hurt the feelings of Kurdish students," complained Sarkawt Khidhir, a dentistry student. He recalls a dispute about the Saddam trial with one lecturer who called the case unfair - which upset the students, many of whom are from families who fell victim to Saddam's campaign against the Kurds.

In general, though, most here agree that the relocation of Arab lecturers has more pros than cons for higher education in the Kurdistan region. Faraydoon Muheddin, deputy dean of the dentistry faculty at Sulaimaniyah University, where twelve Arab lecturers teach, values their academic skills highly. "They have been very useful," he said, pointing out that they fill gaps in expertise.

For Baghdad students, the exodus of their lecturers is a real tragedy. Those who go are usually replaced by young, inexperienced assistant lecturers - and right now there aren't enough senior teaching staff to supervise masters and doctoral candidates.

Ayad Abdullah, a masters student at Baghdad University's science faculty, said he's been through three supervisors so far. "My first, the head of the biology department, was killed, and the second left for Erbil University," he said. "It is a real major loss of scientific expertise."

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