

Special School for Returning Kurds

Author: [Alan Attoof](#)

An education programme designed especially for the children of returning Kurdish expats is intended to cushion their culture shock.

For 16-year-old Sara Aso, moving to the Iraqi Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah this year after spending her formative years in Germany was something of a culture shock. "There are no cafes to go to," she says, "And I can't wear my normal clothes because boys here stare at me so much."

Sara is part of a growing minority in the city. Since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, the number of expat families choosing to return to Iraqi Kurdistan each year has increased from dozens to hundreds and is expected to rise.

Many of the children now arriving in Sulaimaniyah have spent most of their lives abroad, and their western outlook is at odds with the region's traditional ways.

Of the many problems this has posed, one of the thorniest has been education. Changing schools is never easy, but moving to one in a new country with an alien culture and language can be a recipe for disaster.

In a bid to ease the transition, the Sulaimaniyah provincial administration has taken the innovative step of setting up the province's first "international school".

"At first, the Ministry of Education wanted to supervise the project itself," explained Kawan Faraj, senior educational field officer for Kurdistan Save the Children, the non-government organisation, NGO, now running the project. "But it fell to us, because as an experienced children's NGO, we could set up the Gasha School and handle the sensitivities involved more easily than the government."

The main objectives of the Gasha School project are to facilitate the return of Kurdish families from abroad and create a supportive environment for their children. "We hope it will also become an international school for children of foreign families who come to Iraqi Kurdistan on long missions," added Faraj.

The school opened its doors in September 2004, but so far it has confined its teaching to language classes in English, Arabic and Kurdish, to improve the students' communication skills. The full curriculum will be introduced in January, and English will be the teaching medium.

"At first I went to a school where all the classes were taught in Kurdish, and I didn't like it," said Dilveen Jameel Ahmed, 15, whose family moved back to the region from Italy in August. "The other students treated me as if I was different.

"But after I heard about this school through a friend and started studying here, I felt better."

Of the 236 pupils at the school, just under half are secondary-school students who have classes in the afternoons, while the rest attend the primary school that runs in the morning.

The school has just nine teachers who are working hard to make the venture a success, but they admit there are a number of unusual problems that both they and the students have to overcome.

“We have pupils from many different countries, which means we are dealing with the products of very different education systems,” said acting headmistress Muneera Omer Hasan. “There are some things which may be completely normal for them but which are totally unacceptable in this society. We keep telling them they have to fit in with the culture and behavioural patterns here, but it is hard for them and it’s a message that takes time to digest.”

Teachers working at the school insist the students should conform to the local cultural standards.

“I don’t have any problems with the teaching,” said Shawnim Ghareen Qadir, the school’s Arabic teacher, “The problem is the pupils’ behaviour. They have been used to a lot of freedom - they could leave the classroom without permission, chew gum in class, and we want to teach them that such behaviour doesn’t go with our cultural traditions.”

While the main problems for indigenous teachers may stem from cultural differences, for Steve Harvey, a British volunteer teaching English at the school, the largest obstacle is finding a language to communicate in.

“Some of the students know almost no English, and I have no other common language with them,” he said.

Harvey, who previously taught in the UK, feels the project is worthwhile but finds Kurdish teaching methods formal and inflexible.

Given his preference for a more relaxed style of teaching, it is little surprise that most of the students say their favourite class is English. “I only like English, not the other lessons,” said seven-year-old Lania Rebeen shyly.

With an average of eight different nationalities in each class at Gasha School, Harvey acknowledges that it would be impossible to find a teaching method that suits everybody.

“The biggest problem is not just that the system here is different,” he said. “It is that students have come from all over Europe, so even if you could replicate, say, a German system, it wouldn’t work for a student returning from Sweden.”

The school may give the children of returning families a softer landing in Sulaimaniyah, but many of them feeling torn between their previous and new environments, and will still have tough decisions to make when they are old enough to leave.

“I don’t know if I will stay here or go back to Europe when I graduate,” said Sara. “I can’t decide, because this is my homeland but I grew up over there. Sometimes I feel like a stranger in both places.”

Alan Attoof is IWPR’s Northern Region Coordinator in Iraq.

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