

# **A SURVEY OF EDUCATION IN IRAQ: 1970-PRESENT: Challenge and Change**

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## **Introduction:**

The education system in modern Iraq, both public and private, was established back in 1921. By the early 1970s, education became public and free at all levels, and compulsory at the primary level. Two ministries manage education: 1) the Ministry of Education (which is in charge of pre-school, primary, secondary and vocational education), and 2) the Ministry of Higher Education (which oversees tertiary education and research centres).

Primary education provides a six-year course, at the end of which the pupil must pass an examination in order to be admitted to secondary school. The curriculum is based on Western models of education and also includes religious teaching. The language of instruction is Arabic, except in Kurdistan where it is mainly Kurdish. Secondary schools have a three-year intermediate course, followed by another three-year course in preparation for entrance to college and for which a national examination must be passed. Secondary education for girls dates from 1929. Iraq has seven universities, all co-educational, with the University of Baghdad being the most important higher education institution in the country. There also exist some 20 technical institutes throughout Iraq.

As for Christian schools, they had been operating under the Ottoman rule, long before modern Iraq came into being. They were founded by European Catholic missionaries who began arriving in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and who later opened primary schools. First it was the Carmelites who founded St. Joseph's School in Baghdad in 1721, and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French Dominicans opened several schools in Mosul and the surrounding villages, as well as a major seminary for both Chaldean and Syrian students. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the turn of the American Jesuits, who were invited by the Chaldean Patriarch in 1932, and they ran very successfully a high school (Baghdad College) and a university (Al-Hikma) until their expulsion in 1969.

## **1970-1984: The Good Years:**

During this period, Iraq's education system was regarded as one of the best in the region. It coincided with a time of economic prosperity that favoured the Christians in particular, due to their better education and knowledge of the West. Some 20% of teachers at both secondary and tertiary education were Christians, who were furthermore well represented in the tourist sector, in hotels and restaurants, plus the liberal professions and technical jobs, as well as being traders and artisans.

In 1974 the Ba'th regime nationalised all private schools in Iraq, including Christian and even Qur'anic ones. This dealt another major blow to the Church in Iraq, coming only a few years after the expulsion of the Jesuits. Education has always been an integral part of the Church's mission anywhere in the world. Some of the priests and nuns tried to pursue the educational task within the framework of nationalisation, but were dissuaded by the oath of allegiance they would've had to swear to the regime. Instead, the Church adapted itself to the new situation by holding religion classes after school hours and also by providing adult education courses in scripture and theology, with certificates awarded at the end.

But in spite of the above problems, and for about ten years, Iraq gained an international reputation for the high quality of its education, particularly in its scientific and technological institutions. By 1984, major achievements could be pointed out, which included: gross

enrolment rates of 100%, an almost complete gender parity in enrolment, a decline of illiteracy among the 15-45 age group to less than 10%, and the dropout/repetition rates becoming the lowest in the Middle East and North Africa. Spending on education reached 6% of the Gross National Product (GNP) and 20% of Iraq's total government budget. Iraq also took pride in winning a UNESCO prize for eradicating illiteracy.

Between 1976 and 1986, the Ba'th government made great efforts to generalise opportunities for basic education throughout the whole of the country. The number of primary school pupils increased by 30%, with female pupils going up from 35 to 44% of the total. At the secondary level, the number of students increased by 46% and the number of female students went up by 55%, from 29 to 36% of the total. Baghdad, which had about 30% of Iraq's population, had 26% of the primary pupils and 32% of the secondary students.

Baghdad was home to most educational facilities above the secondary level since it was the site not only of Baghdad University (which, in the academic year 1983/84 had about 35,000 students) but also of the Foundation of Technical Institutes (with over 34,000), Mustansiriyya University (with over 11,000) and the University of Technology (formerly the Jesuit Al-Hikma University) with over 7000 students. The universities of Basra, Mosul and Erbil, taken together, enrolled 26% of all students in higher education in that academic year.

### **1984-1989: The Years of Decline:**

The main cause for the deterioration of education during this period was the intensification of the war between Iraq and Iran, which cost a total of some one million lives. The war inevitably led to a diversion of public resources towards military expenditure, which resulted in a steep decline in overall non-military spending. Thus the education budget suffered from a deficit that continued to grow as the years passed and as other wars broke out. There was also no strategic plan in place to address these issues at the time.

But even before the decline in spending began to hurt the education system, Saddam Hussein had already made his mark on the curriculum. In the late 1970s he had ordered that school textbooks be revised and rewritten from the Ba'th point of view. They became filled with references to Ba'th Party ideology, as well as high praise for Saddam's supposed heroism, describing the wars that he waged as being both justified and victorious.

In the mid-1980s, the government was still hoping to expand Salah ad-Din University in Erbil in the north-east and to establish Al-Rashid University outside Baghdad. In addition, in 1987, the government announced plans to establish four more universities: one in central Tikrit, one each at al-Kufa and al-Qadisiyya in the south, and one at al-Anbar in the West of the country. The ensuing wars, however, made all these plans rather difficult to carry out. In spite of the shortage of wartime manpower, the regime was curiously always reluctant to recruit students from the universities.

### **1990-2003: The Crisis Years:**

The 1990s brought about the so-called First Gulf War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, was then defeated by the American-led coalition, and had economic sanctions imposed on it. The continual deterioration of the educational institutions can be seen in the following outcomes:

1. The share of education in the Gross National Product (GNP) dropped to almost half, resting at 3.3% by 2003.
2. As Gross Income declined, resources for education suffered
3. Education came to assume only 8% of the total government budget
4. Teacher salaries dropped in real terms from an average of \$700 per month to \$7 per month in 2002/03.

5. The dropout rate reached 20%
6. The gender gap widened (95% male, 80% female)
  7. The repetition rate reached double the figure in the rest of the region, i.e. 15% for primary and 34% for secondary schools.

During the sanctions of the 1990s, Christians suffered alongside the rest of the population, although they had lost a disproportionate number of casualties in the Iraq-Iran war. When the embargo began to bite hard, thousands of Christians started emigrating to seek a better life in the West. At the same time, however, the Church in Iraq was hard at work trying to alleviate the suffering of both Christians and Muslims. For example, many pastors and imams were sharing resources in order to help their local people. Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid founded Caritas Iraq, (which is equivalent to our CAFOD), while Bishop Kassab of Basra ran a mobile pharmacy that made the rounds 24 hours a day throughout the 1990s. Patriarch Bidawid also founded Babylon College as a theological institute open to both seminarians and lay Christians of all denominations. This was a unique venture in the Middle East, and the degrees are validated by the Urbanian University in Rome. The Church continued to run its cultural, social and charitable societies, in addition to a printing press, a radio station, a number of websites and a variety of publications still in existence today.

During the crisis years, UNESCO played an important part in helping Iraqi authorities to improve education at all levels. It played a leading role within the framework of the “Oil for Food” Programme. In the north of Iraq, UNESCO, together with UNICEF, implemented the programme through capacity building, the procurement of educational materials and textbooks, and the construction of over 1,100 primary schools, 276 secondary schools and 33 institutes of higher education. In central and southern Iraq, UNESCO, with other UN agencies, contributed to the programme in its capacity as observer, monitoring the distribution of educational materials. In Baghdad itself, it constructed a model secondary school for girls and provided additional training for primary and secondary school teachers in both subject matter and methodology, as well as the training of administrative staff in management at all levels.

Unfortunately, however, and in spite of the best efforts by the U.N. agencies, the education system, particularly in the south of the country, worsened, due to the abnormal conditions. The bad factors were exemplified in the lack of resources, politicisation of education, uneven migration, displacement of teachers, increasing restlessness among the population and corruption at all levels. By the year 2000, the literacy rate slumped to 5% for males and 23% for females.

### **Education After the 2003 Invasion:**

In spite of the widespread chaos and destruction that followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority, with considerable international assistance, undertook an ambitious plan to reform Iraq’s education system. Among its immediate goals were the removal of previously pervasive Ba’th ideology from the curricula and the injection of substantial increases in teacher salaries and training programmes that Saddam’s regime had neglected in the 1990s. The new Ministry of Education appointed a national curriculum commission to revise the curricula in all subject areas. In 2003, and due both to previous under-funding and the devastation caused by the invading forces, an estimated 80% of Iraq’s 15,000 school buildings needed rehabilitation and lacked basic sanitary facilities. In addition, the majority of schools also lacked libraries and laboratories.

It is unfortunate that between 2003 and 2008, the combination of the war on terror and the ensuing civil war further destabilised the system of education in Iraq, as the following examples show:

1. About 3000 schools were severely damaged and required rebuilding
2. Schools in dangerous areas were forced to close for long periods, causing severe disruption to education
3. Education personnel were kidnapped, attacked and killed by various gangs and militias
4. Teacher absenteeism, and that of female students, due to the daily security threats, reached a high level until very recently.

Higher education was particularly badly affected. In the anarchy that followed the invasion, universities (which already were in poor physical condition) were looted, along with Iraq's National Museum and other important institutions. Hundreds of millions of dollars were needed to rehabilitate campuses, but the budget for higher education was meagre and most of it was earmarked for wages and salaries. Due to the widespread violence and sectarian terrorism, hundreds of university lecturers and administrators were murdered and thousands fled abroad, along with medical doctors and other professionals. Today, in London alone, for example, there are some 100 Christian academics with Ph.D.s, so imagine how many more Muslim academics there must be. Such is the seriousness of the brain drain in Iraq that it will take a very long time for it to be remedied.

Sectarianism is still, unfortunately, casting a dark shadow over student life in Iraq's universities. Campuses have become battle-grounds for political organisations vying, often violently, for influence. This is compounded by the increase in religious fanaticism whereby Muslim extremists try to enforce the veiling of women students (including Christian ones) and the separation of the sexes. The College of Babylon and the Chaldean major seminary had to be moved to a new location in Erbil, after the fanatics moved into the Dora section of Baghdad, expelling thousands of Christians from their homes and closing down churches, schools, convents, monasteries and orphanages there. (Dora, by the way, used to be nicknamed "the Vatican of Iraq").

All this, however, did not prevent the various international agencies from trying to rescue education in Iraq. The U.N. and the World Bank established two trust funds that were earmarked specifically for Iraq, while USAid made contracts through the U.S. Supplementary Budget especially for Iraq. But although these programmes were a great start, they did not reach the level as assessed by the October 2003 UN/WB Needs Assessment Study of \$4.8 billion. However, within the last few years, USAid has managed to reconstruct a couple of thousands of schools and to help pupils move away from rote learning methodology in decrepit, unsanitary buildings to interactive learning in rehabilitated classrooms. Over 20 million new textbooks have been supplied by both UNESCO and USAid. Tens of thousands of primary and secondary school teachers have been receiving training and technical assistance. A series of model schools have been established where Iraqi educators implement new and innovative teaching methods, giving students access to much-improved equipment.

Even the British Council has helped out. For example, back in 2004, an international symposium was organised in collaboration with Iraq's Ministry of Education and the University of Westminster, which examined the rehabilitation and development of research institutes. Later that year, senior personalities from Iraq's northern universities participated in a special seminar at the University of Cardiff, which looked into the issues of diversity and devolution in higher education. Similar events have been organised by the British Council in other venues, such as the University of Birmingham where special courses were constructed to provide Iraqi academics and administrators with a greater depth of knowledge and expertise in university leadership and management, and to facilitate further partnerships.

### **Christian Schools in Post 2003 Iraq:**

We start with the two institutions that were "Iraqicised" by the Ba'th regime, following the expulsion of the American Jesuits. Al-Hikma University became a college of technology, as was mentioned before. Baghdad College, on the other hand, kept its name and succeeded in retaining a high academic standard and remaining an elite high school for boys. The government has promised compensation to the Jesuits and the matter is still in the courts. There is a community of Jesuits (three Americans and two Iraqis) based in Amman, Jordan, who are performing various ministries there but who used to teach in Baghdad. They have informed me that, if compensated, they will use the money by starting to build a library, a couple of lecture halls and a small community residence in Baghdad. They are also hoping (perhaps against hope) that Baghdad College will be returned to them, and, if so, they will staff it mostly with lay Iraqi teachers.

As for the other Christian schools that had been nationalised, their names were all changed, but, as far as I know, they have all been returned to the various church authorities. Thus there are a number of Chaldean, Syrian and Armenian primary schools, plus a Syrian Orthodox secondary school for girls. It was at this school that the Syrian Orthodox priest, Fr. Adil Abboudi, was teaching a few years ago, who was warned by some Muslim extremists not to teach girls, but when he did not heed their warning, he was assassinated.

One curious development in the last 15 years or so, has been the emergence of American Evangelical schools in Iraqi Kurdistan. The warm relations between the Kurds and these Evangelicals dates back to 1988, the time of Saddam's chemical assault on the Kurdish town of Halabja. About 14,000 survivors were allowed to migrate to the United States and settle in Nashville, Tennessee. A few years later, the Kurds were so grateful to the Americans for helping them attain their autonomous status, that they allowed a group of Nashville Evangelical missionaries known as the Servant Group International, to establish schools in Kurdistan. They built a chain of so-called "classical schools of the Medes" (CSM), because the Kurds consider themselves to be the modern descendants of the ancient Medes.

Their goal is to equip students to positively shape the future of their families, communities and Kurdish nation. Lessons are conducted in English mainly, but also in Kurdish and Arabic. Over 95% of the students are Muslims, with the rest

coming from Christian and other backgrounds. The schools have the enthusiastic support of all government officials and community leaders. The American Evangelicals also help the Kurdish authorities in business affairs, by brokering deals, particularly oil drilling contracts. When the American army entered Baghdad in 2003, they were accompanied by other Evangelical missionaries, carrying with them Bibles, Band-Aids and stacks of dollar notes. When they got nowhere in trying to convert Muslims, they turned to the native Christians and converted some of them. They attempted to open a school and a social centre in Baghdad, but, when a number of them were assassinated, they packed their bags and headed north to Kurdistan.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

Iraq's education system has gone through phases of turmoil and change since 1970. At the moment, issues such as a centralised and inefficient administrative system, poor school conditions, an insufficient supply of schools, poor quality school input, lack of teachers and teacher training—all need to be urgently addressed. Even though the security situation has somewhat improved, Iraq still remains a rather volatile and dangerous country to live in.

The future of Iraq's education is obviously tied up with the future of Iraq itself, which is uncertain. While the regional elections earlier this year went fairly smoothly, there remain the much more important parliamentary elections, perhaps at the beginning of 2010. But democracy isn't just about holding elections. It's also about ensuring human rights for every individual, about cherishing the freedoms of conscience, expression and religion, about believing in equality before the law, about separating religion from politics, and about accepting the full rights of minority groups. All these important principles need to be instilled in people through education and other means, and Iraq has to develop its own brand of democracy from within, because democracy cannot be imposed from without.

After the Americans leave the country, other grave challenges will be facing the nation, perhaps another civil war and more violence and anarchy. The Sunni-Shi'a conflict will certainly go on, and there will be the inevitable showdown between Arabs and Kurds over Kirkuk and its oil. There may even be further brutal persecution of Christians and other religious minorities by extremists. Conflicts such as these can only have a great detrimental effect on education, which has already suffered enough damage.

But perhaps we can end on a positive note. The fact that the ultra-religious parties lost badly in the regional elections may indicate that the ordinary people are craving for peace, stability and normality. It may even indicate that they wish to keep religion separate from politics. In any case, this, plus the improvement in security and the return of some Iraqis from exile, may give us some glimmer of hope for the future.

Education itself is also changing. After many years of intellectual suffocation through the "lecture-listen" style of teaching, there are now signs of an intellectual renaissance, especially in higher education. Under the Ba'ath regime, teachers were not allowed to teach analytical skills, and students were expected simply to repeat

things back to the teacher. Now, however, open discussions and debates abound, for the government appears to be listening to the teachers and teachers are listening to students and hearing their concerns.

Progress in education, like democracy itself, will take many years to achieve and will have to overcome countless challenges on the way. Before the Americans leave, however, the Obama administration must clean up the mess left by Bush's ill-advised adventure. It is shocking that, six years after the invasion, electricity and running water are still in short supply, open sewage can be found everywhere and much of the infrastructure is still damaged. But more importantly, America must help the United Nations to bring together all the rival factions of Iraq, in order to resolve their differences and agree on deals and solutions that will bring PERMANENT peace and stability to the country. Only in such conditions can education thrive, and, hopefully, Iraq will once again be the envy of the whole region for the quality of its education. It may even be awarded a second prize by UNESCO.