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# The higher education system in Iraq and its future

## ABSTRACT

*Despite the fact that higher education in Iraq has suffered from the scourges of many wars (1980–1988, 1991, 2003), international sanctions (1990–2003) and governments' interference, since 1968, the vast majority of its members struggled to keep the universities and colleges as effective instruments in teaching, researching and providing the society with qualified graduates. But one cannot deny the many obstacles and challenges that faced these institutions. After 2003, neither the occupying forces nor the political parties they imposed on Iraq showed any real interest in developing this sector. One main reason was, perhaps, because the United States feared the educated and skilled Iraqi brains that were the main reasons behind the successes the country had achieved in the past. ((One could cite the words of the former US secretary of state, Madeline Albright, who answered a question about why the sanctions were still imposed on Iraq while admitting that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) were destroyed; she said it was because the brains were still there (Al-Rubaie 2008). Also, the declaration of President Bashar al-Asad who said that following the occupation of Iraq in 2003 he received Colin Powell, then US secretary of state, who warned him against receiving or sheltering Iraqi scientists and academics (al-Mayadeen 2013)). Also, because of their conservative religious attitudes, the ruling clique after 2003 alienated the technocrats fearing that their role in developing the society and the state could be a real challenge to their own parochial ideologies. The result was an acute deterioration in the field of education in general and higher education in particular.*

*In general, the higher education system in Iraq was faced with a major challenge, which was represented by the insistence of the different regimes to control*

## KEYWORDS

higher education in Iraq  
assassination of Iraqi academics  
de-Baathification effects on higher education  
Iraqi universities under sanctions and occupation  
domination of conservative parties and education  
Iraqi women academic

*the education system. However, the official interference was not always harmful to education in general and higher education in particular. For example, in 1968, the government approved a law requiring the free and compulsory education at all levels, and in 1977, it passed the law for the eradication of illiteracy. UNESCO duly presented Iraq with the prize of the year for eradicating illiteracy in 1982 (Ranjan and Jain 2009). Also, between 1970 and 1980, the regime took a very positive step by sending thousands of students abroad to study for higher degrees. By the end of the decade Iraqi higher education was self-sufficient in all fields of knowledge.*

*The aim of this essay is to show how the education system has been neglected since 2003 till the present. The article will try to discuss the reality of the higher education system, compare it to the past and look at its future, by examining the main challenges that male and female academics faced during the occupation and the domination of religious-conservative movements in the post-occupation government. The authors' experience as former members of Baghdad University staff has been the main source for this essay.*

### **IRAQI HIGHER EDUCATION BEFORE 2003**

Although the first university in Iraq, Baghdad University, was officially established in 1957, Iraqi colleges and higher education institutes have been present in Iraq since the first decade of the twentieth century. Law and Islamic Studies Schools (colleges) were established in 1908. They were followed by other schools for engineering, education, literature and science in the 1920s and 1930s. By the end of the 1940s, Iraq had colleges in all fields of education, sciences, art and humanities. All these colleges were included in the University of Baghdad. This was followed by the establishment of another university in Baghdad, al-Mustansiriya (1963), and the University of Mosul in 1967. The latter was also formed of the amalgamation of colleges that existed since 1959. The number has mushroomed ever since with the establishment of universities in other parts of Iraq, such as Basra and Kufa. In 1969, the Ministry of Higher Education was established for the first time in Iraq, and was headed by a woman, Suad Ismail Khalil, a first in Iraq and the Arab World. In 1959, Iraq was also the first Arab country to appoint a female minister, Dr. Naziha al-Dulaimi, minister of municipalities. By the end of the twentieth century, Iraq had 20 state universities, 37 technical institutes, 10 private universities and 9 technical colleges. They included 201 colleges, 800 departments and 28 research centres. It is worth mentioning that a large number of these universities, and all the private universities, except one, were established during the Iraq-Iran war (1980–88) and the thirteen years of inhumane sanctions imposed on Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (UNESCO 2004).

Of course, the Iraq-Iran war and the strict sanctions affected all fields of life, health, social and economic prosperity. In the field of higher education, research was most affected in the sense that grants to study abroad were suspended; the universities and their staff were prohibited from travelling abroad or importing any materials, books, scientific journals, research papers or anything else related to new scientific materials needed by universities. Even subscriptions of Iraqi academics to the various scientific journals were suspended by the countries that publish them; the given reason was that these materials could help in producing weapons of mass destruction. Most harming was the financial difficulties which hit the universities' staff. Their

salaries sharply dropped in value, due mainly to the sharp depreciation of the Iraqi currency, the dinar. The value of one Iraqi dinar equaled almost three dollars until 1980, after the Iraq-Iran war and during the sanctions one US dollar was exchanged for 2000 and sometime 3000 Iraqi dinars (Niblock 2001; Ranjan and Jain 2009).

The situation of education in Iraq following the Iran-Iraq war has affected the proportion of participants in the education system (higher, secondary and primary education), as well as the lack of government support for these sectors which naturally resulted in a steep decline in overall social spending; thus, the education budget suffered from a deficit which has continued to grow. The share of education in the gross national product [GNP] dropped to almost half, resting at 3.3 per cent in 2003. Additionally, education came to assume only 8 per cent of the total government budget especially after the dropping in government spending per student on education from \$620 in the 'Golden Years of the 1970s' to \$47 today. Moreover, the enrolment in primary schools dropped by 10 per cent and the dropout rate reached 20 per cent [31 per cent of all females and 18 per cent of all males], whereas the repetition rate reached a figure which is the double of the MENA region, 15 per cent, and 34 per cent for secondary schools. The gender gap increased [95 per cent male, 80 per cent female] (Issa and Jamil 2010: 361). Professors and lecturers who were able in the 1970s to acquire a house and a new car were obliged or forced either to sell them or keep them in garages because they were not able to maintain them. The same happened to their houses and furniture. Others used their cars as taxis to increase their income.

Of course, students were hit even more by these economic difficulties. Although the government tried to minimize the difficulties of the students the effects were clear. The flight of Iraqi intellectuals, such as tutors or researchers, only exacerbated the crisis students faced. Depression mixed with a sense of defiance was the attitude of most of the Iraqi academics at that time. It is a fact that the right to strike was not permitted and could result in harsh disciplinary and security actions but one must say that the vast majority of members of staff did not even think of taking such an action. They felt that striking would only harm the students and make them lose their opportunity to study. This was shown in the number of Iraqi students in the education system. In 1990, the number of students enrolled in the educational system was 4.715.000. But in 1995–1996, the number dropped to 4.4 million (1/4 of the population). However, in 1998–1999, the number jumped to 5.1 million students. Of course, this number dropped again after 2003, especially in higher education (UNIFEM 2004). However, it was a well-known fact for those Iraqis working in the higher education system that the percentage of tutors was less than the percentage of students. This created a twofold crisis. First, it made the tutors teach for extra hours, sometimes different subjects to cope with this problem. Second, it made them spend less and less hours on research to follow scientific developments in their fields (Abdul Ghafour and al-Hajaj 2014).

From 2002 to 2004, over 2000 members of the teaching staff had lost their positions; of the 19,112 left in 2004, these MA and Ph.D. holders were 56 per cent male (10,107) and 44 per cent female (7769). Of the 257,278 students, good number included foreigners, mainly from Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Mauritania and Somalia. According to the regulations of the higher education system in Iraq, only holders of MA and Ph.D. degrees have the right to teach in the different universities. It should be noted that almost all the teaching staff were Iraqis (with very few Syrian and Palestinian refugees).

The following table shows that the numbers of the academic staff throughout Iraq were enough to manage the education system in the universities.

University name	Total	Total female	Total male	Teacher-student ratio
Anbar	800	216	584	8
Babylon	882	343	539	13
Baghdad	3962	2004	1958	17
Basrah	1898	888	1010	8
Diyala	442	189	253	13
Diwanayah	658	294	364	14
Islamic University	36	0	36	40
Dahuk	277	n.a.	n.a.	12
Kerbala	264	138	126	7
Mosul	2935	1148	1787	10
Kirkuk	60	n.a.	n.a.	27
Kufa	410	n.a.	n.a.	18
Mustansiriya	1584	853	731	22
Salah Al-Din	1427	596	831	10
Sulaymaniyah	489	n.a.	n.a.	16
Technology	1267	543	724	10
Thi-Qar	227	89	138	9
Tikrit	1084	330	754	6
Wassit	99	22	77	43
Al Nahrain	275	106	169	7
Iraqi Com for	36	10	26	11
Total	19,112	7769	10,107	13

The table refers to the number of faculty members by University and by Governorate.

Source: Statistical Data for the University Level, UNESCO (2004: 88).

As mentioned above, some of these universities, institutions and all the private universities were established during the Iraq-Iran war; five new universities were formed: Kufa, Tikrit, Al-Qadisiya, al-Anbar and the Islamic (al-Iraqia University now). During the sanctions, seven new universities were formed: Babylon, Saddam (al-Nahrain now), Diyala, Karbala, Thi Qar, Kirkuk and Wasit. The Iraqi universities continued at that time to receive Arab students, undergraduate and postgraduate, from some Arab countries. One could fairly say that the occupation destroyed the infrastructure of Iraq and did not spare the higher education system. Following the occupation the number of Arab students gradually decreased to zero. Due to the chaos that overwhelmed the country, the looting, burning of the universities and the use of a large number of higher institution buildings by the US forces and emerging political parties and their militias as headquarters, numerous teaching institutions closed. Thus, the standard of teaching and the attendance of students decreased dramatically.

One may ask how could Iraq, a country embroiled in continuous conflicts, internal and regional, manage to furnish and run any higher education institutes. The answer could be found in the historical accumulation of Iraqi

academic expertise. Iraq is well known for its important and sizable elite. The Iraqi intelligentsia was well ahead of their Arab compatriots in the region, except the Lebanese and Syrians, and was the one which helped to transform culture and establish the education systems and the press in the Gulf countries. In the 1950s, when oil revenues and wealth began to appear in the Iraqi economy, plans were initiated to increase the number of educated and well-trained Iraqi experts. Grants were issued to western universities to introduce young Iraqis to western knowledge and values (of course, there were others who started this venture in the 1930s and 1940s, but they were limited). In the 1970s, when oil income increased, the Iraqi government issued a plan by which thousands of students annually were sent abroad to pursue postgraduate studies. This included Baath Party members who were given postgraduate grants and were sent abroad. But it is equally true that a larger number of non-Baathists were given similar opportunities. Indeed, this was an indication that the government, although favouring Baath members, did not discriminate against non-Baathists.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER THE OCCUPATION**

With the escalation of American threats to Iraq in 2002, Iraqi academics, staff and students, were split between those who thought that an American invasion could rid them of a dictatorial regime that refused to change, end the years of depression, create a prosperous society similar to the ones in the Gulf and establish democracy as well as respect for human rights and those who strongly believed that an invasion and occupation would only bring destruction and division. The latter were in the minority. All attempts to convince those who believed that any change through invasion and occupation would be a harmful one for Iraq was in vain. Needless to say, those who had positive attitude towards US intentions were mainly guided by their opposition, and sometimes hatred of the policies of the Baath Party. Following the invasion and with the resumption of studies in May 2003, members of the higher education system noticed the great damage done to their institutions, including the Ministry of Higher Education. According to Fernando Baez, director of Venezuela's National Library and author of *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, up to one million books and ten million unique documents were destroyed, lost or stolen in Iraq since 2003 (Otterman, Hill and Wilson 2010). Even those who previously had a positive attitude towards the US role and those who were expecting democracy, respect for human rights, freedom of expression and development in their fields and prosperity slowly, but gradually, began to change their minds. This was a direct result of the chaos and destruction the war (to liberate Iraq) brought. Iraqi universities were either looted or burned to the ground. According to the United Nations University, about 84 per cent of Iraq's higher education institutions were set on fire, looted, or destroyed (Zangna 2008). In the best cases the campuses which were looted but not burned were made into either camps for the invading armies or headquarters for the ex-patriot Iraqi groups that joined the invasion. One could fairly say that in the destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure, the occupation did not spare the higher education system.

In 2003–2005, Iraqi academia had to accept the occupation and the newcomers who accompanied it, even though the latter had no knowledge of the higher education system. Immediately after the invasion a low-ranking US army officer, who in turn appointed some of his colleagues, was made

responsible for the higher education system. These officers had no experience in the academia's field. In another words, all of Iraq's brains were made subordinates to young and inexperienced US army officers.

More harmful was the introduction of a new Law of De-Baathification (issued in May 2003 by the US civil governor in Iraq, Paul Bremer, who was entitled to uproot the Baath). This law barred certain levels of Baathists from working in the universities. As a result thousands of able and qualified staff lost their jobs. In Baghdad University alone, around 300 members of the academic staff were sacked (Allawi 2007). The low-ranking members of the Baath party who were not affected by this law were so intimidated that they either went into hiding or joined the new religious-sectarian parties. This law was followed by threats and a wave of assassinations that hit Iraqi scientists and university staff. A fair number of non-Baathists scientists were also assassinated or kidnapped. This phenomenon started with the assassination of the president of Baghdad University and other members of the different Iraqi universities, mainly those who opposed the occupation. The US and its pro-invasion Iraqi administrations exonerated these acts as directed only against Baathists. One could confidently say that the assassination of the president of Baghdad University in May 2003, Dr. Mohammed A. Al-Rawi, a professor in medicine, ushered in a wave of assassination of Iraqi scientists and academics, a wave that has not stopped. Officially the US and Iraqi administrations took no action to investigate his murder or other similar crimes because, according to their story, they were killed because they were Baathists. This meant, according to their exoneration, whoever was murdered was a Baathist and needed no investigation or protection. This phenomenon continued and spread to other Iraqi universities, and hit Baathists and non-Baathists, Arabs and Kurds, Muslims and non-Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites. An official report in 2004 confirmed that it was necessary to systematically destroy all the materials that had helped in the production of weapons of mass destruction and thus the need to physically liquidate Iraqi scientists (Salama 2005). However, judging by the names of those assassinated, one can find that the list included scientist and academics in all fields of knowledge, and not only those who helped in the production of weapons of mass destruction. One could also add that all the different internal, regional and international intelligence elements participated in the wave of assassinations that hit the members of the teaching staff of the different universities and Iraq's distinguished scientists. The Americans and the Israelis were the first to be accused of initiating the assassinations. It was clear then that this wave was aiming at liquidating the Iraqi brains and destroying the future of the next generation. According to recent statistics, approximately 470–500 members of higher education were assassinated between 2003 and March 2011, more than 144–150 of them were professors (Adil 2011; Baker, Ismael and Ismael 2010). To make matter worse, Iraq witnessed the highest flight of intellectuals in its history. This could be split into two periods: the first one was before 2003, during the Iraq-Iran war and the sanctions, and the second was after 2003. Of course, the exodus after 2003 was larger. Because of their large numbers, the neighbouring states found it difficult to employ them.

Added to the assassinations, Iraq's academia witnessed new and sometimes strange challenges. Some of these challenges were closely related to the behaviour of the occupying forces (making junior army officers responsible for this sector), and others related to the general circumstances that overwhelmed Iraq (the wave of assassinations and kidnapping), while others related to the

sectarian and conservative policies of the new ruling parties (transforming the academic institutions into sectarian and racial centres), which succeeded at the beginning in swaying the younger generation of Iraqi students and staff. All these challenges managed to interfere and change education policy in Iraq, which in the end resulted in a shaky and uncertain future for this sector.

To start with, the situation in Baghdad deteriorated. Chaos and the absence of law and order prevailed and academic life became more and more difficult. On the one hand, there were US soldiers who were present in all campuses intimidating the staff and the students. In many cases, they arrested and assassinated members of staff, mistakenly according to what they claimed. The lack of security that prevailed over all the country and the academic institutions was another auxiliary element. Needless to say, this adversely affected student attendance and the standard of teaching.

After 2006, Iraqi academics lived under the constant threat of sectarian violence. These threats were mixed ones. Some came from the sectarian parties and others from al-Qaida organization, which threatened with death all university staff members and students if they went to their colleges. In some cases, classes and Ph.D. viva (oral examinations) were cancelled because members of al-Qaida threatened the students and the members of the viva board. Consequently, vivas were convened behind closed doors to ensure the safety of the participants. In other cases, the viva had to be moved from one college in the north of Baghdad to another in the south because the post-graduate student's sect was not acceptable in his or her original college. The case of al-Mustansiriya University is another example; frequent bombing and blasts killed or maimed more than 335 students and staff members in 2007. As a solution, 12-foot high blast walls were built around the university, and the university fell under the control of one militia on the pretext of protecting it (Williams and Riyadh 2009).

It is also worth mentioning that the great number of newly introduced religious holidays, the continuous and unexpected announcements of curfews and, finally, the domination of certain sectarian militias on some of the campuses resulted in preventing students from attending. The domination of one militia and sect, in any given area, prevented students from other sects from attending. This sectarian differentiation and segregation was also obvious in the distribution of grants abroad or inside Iraq. Most of those who were granted this privilege either belonged to or were members of the ruling sectarian parties. This was similar to the Baath example wherein grants were bestowed to party members or on those who were prepared to join or support the party.

Before 2003, only the Baath party controlled all the universities; after 2003, each university or college came under the control of a different party or a militia. Moreover, these new parties and militias were struggling among themselves, and their struggle and differences were transferred to the universities. In 2009, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki interfered and closed down al-Mustansiriya University because of sectarian violence. Dr. Abed Thiab al-Ajili, the former minister for higher education, did the same by continually changing the deans of the university. University administrators and professors all agreed in an interview that the violence continued there because of ties between some of the officials in Mr. Maliki's Shiite party, al-Dawa, and the Students League, which was loyal to the al-Sadr faction controlling the university. They also said that the university administrators were shielding the latter from prosecution. 'Political parties are causing most of the problems

in the universities,' the minister declared at that time. League members are shown marching through campus wearing black masks and waving bright yellow flags. Sana'a al-Tamimi, who teaches educational psychology, said that in 2008, shortly after she was named an assistant dean, Students League members came to her campus office and threatened to kill her, telling her to quit. She resigned after just twenty days (New York Times 2010).

One pro-United States Iraqi writer described the situation in the Iraqi universities following the occupation as follows: systematic political violence carried out by all sides. He also added that during the regime of the old president Saddam Husain, the National Union of Iraqi Students, which represented the ruling Baath party, was the body that censored the activities of the students and the academics. But following the fall of the Baath regime, chaos engulfed the country and new strong Islamic parties emerged, accompanied by strong Shiite armed militias in Baghdad and Sunni (extreme salafi) militias in Mosul carrying their arms inside university campuses. They used these arms to force the academic staff for giving them the exam questions in advance. He added that the militias competed and struggled between themselves for total domination, influence and control of the universities, which led to spreading uncontrollable chaos, which in the end led to the biggest brain drain in the Iraqi history (al-Najjar and al-Ayari 2010).

Sectarian divisions hit academic life very early. Historically, Iraqi universities were very well known for their mixed nature. Neither appointments nor admission was based on a sectarian, religious or ethnic basis. But since 2003 all these things have changed. Gradually, sectarianism has been institutionalized in the higher education system, starting with the appointment of the minister, which was done on a sectarian (quota) basis, down to the appointments of heads of departments. In the government formation of 2006, the minister was from the Sunni's quota, while in 2010, the minister was from the Shia's quota; and each favoured his own sect. Unfortunately, the colleges and universities were sharply divided, and most of the colleges became to look like religious centres rather than scientific establishments. University staff was haunted because of their sectarian affiliation. Fear of discussing any general subject in the classes because of the influence of the sectarian parties was one of the phenomena of the new era, as the universities echoed the policies of the ruling political parties. Academics became hesitant to openly discuss subjects related to political issues with the students because of their blind attachment to the new sectarian parties. Any open discussion would mean a division and strong disputes, which could easily get violent and could be relayed to the parties they belonged to; tutors, in particular the female, felt helpless in solving these sharp divisions, as well as living in fear of the students' reactions. In any open discussion, students often tried to divert the subject in order to find out whether the tutor is with or against the current policies and the domination of the religious parties, stated a female lecturer (Anonymous 2013). Thus, the teaching method remained old fashioned and classic especially among women academics, because they feared that such methods would not be acceptable to the students and the university administration.

In short, Iraqi higher education lost the independence they should enjoy. This was due to the interference of the ruling political parties, especially the religious-sectarian ones which dominate the government. For example, these parties remain the only ones allowed to have activities inside the universities, mostly religious and political activities and not scientific. Leaders of the parties regularly visit Iraqi universities and lecture on subjects that would

serve the interests of the parties rather than the interests of the students and their education. Their aim is to encourage the students either to join the parties or support their ideologies. The former minister, al-Ajili, claimed that he was against such activities, as he told *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper, 'We refuse any attempt by the political parties to interfere in the campuses, and we have ordered the heads of the universities not to allow any party or group to give lectures with political aims in the universities'. He also added that 'most of the heads of the universities adhered to these instructions. And some influential parties in the government wanted to give lectures in universities but they were prevented' (al-Kaabi 2010). But the same newspaper confirmed that members of the Islamic Party, of which al-Ajili was a member, remained free to lecture in Sunni colleges, while followers of Muqtada al-Sadr are still portraying his and his father's portraits in al-Mustansiriya University, and leading members of the Shiite Ammar al-Hakim are still free to lecture in all universities in Shiite dominated areas especially in the universities of southern Iraq (al-Kaabi 2010). According to interviews with Iraqi professors (who preferred to remain anonymous), they all confirmed that the previous minister was a weak person in general, his deputy was stronger and more influential than he and his orders were always neglected by most of the heads of the universities for sectarian reasons (Anonymous 2010). It is also worth mentioning that during his four years in office, the previous Iraqi minister of higher education, who was living outside Iraq for more than 25 years, did not visit any university in southern Iraq, and he rarely visited universities inside Baghdad. Throughout the crisis of al-Mustansiriya University, which we will discuss later, he never visited the university to solve its problems or to enforce his orders. Most Iraqi academics described him as the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time. An expatriate before the invasion, he had no information whatsoever about life in the Iraqi universities (Jawad 2010). Dr. al-Ajili was replaced in 2010 by Mr. Ali al-Adib, another ex-patriot Iraqi who lived more than 30 years outside Iraq, a leading figure in al-Daawa religious sectarian party. According to his opponents he held no higher education degree. His critics claim that the date he states as the one in which he obtained his BA shows that he was only 20 years old when he got this degree, while normally Iraqi students get this degree at the age of 21 and over. However, in 2009, while he was a member of parliament, he obtained an MA degree from al-Mustansiriya University. Ali al-Adib's first act after his appointment was to visit an influential religious personality from his sect who instructed him on how to run the higher education system starting, which is by segregating male from female students (Iraqshia.net). This instruction was implemented indirectly by the students themselves, who, because of fear of the dominating conservative parties, decided to divide their classes in Iraqi colleges into two halves, one for male and the other for female students (Ali 2014). Although this instruction has not been fully carried out, he did take some measures which resulted in the sacking of staff belonging to a different sect than his, on the pretext that they were former Baathists. What happened in Tikrit University in October 2011 is another example. In one ministerial order, the minister sacked 140 staff members, administrators and lecturers, claiming that they were Baathists. He also accused his predecessor of appointing and favouring members of the old Baath party by appointing them in the Iraqi universities. It is worth mentioning all those sacked were staff members in Sunni-dominated areas (Walid 2011).

Despite the fact that there are well-established rules and regulations that govern the higher education system and Iraqi universities, new laws and regulations are being issued according to the situation, and the feelings of the minister, with negative effects on the whole system. There has been continuous interference by the ministry of higher education in academic life, sometimes to impose irregular rules on the universities. For example, for the first time in Iraqi education history, failing students were given the right to sit three or four times for their final examinations, until they passed. This only resulted in producing weak graduates and a low scientific standard. Chaos in the administration was also noticeable; for example, at one stage in 2009, al-Mustansiriya University had three presidents. The original one was relieved from his post, but he refused to quit and was replaced by a new one by the minister. Then, the Prime Minister Mr. al-Maliki himself sacked the new one, who also refused to leave, and so he appointed a third one. Each of the three had his own office, his own secretary and his own bodyguards. They were all performing their daily work in the campus and tried to make their presence felt on by the others. Elsewhere, the orders of the minister were neglected due to the sectarian differences between him and the deans of those universities (al-Jbouri 2010). For example, the order of the minister, Ali al-Adib, to sack 140 members of Tikrit University (Sunni dominated) was challenged by the staff, and the dean of the university rendered his resignation in defiance of the order. Because of this decision, the Province Council of Salahuldin (Tikrit) also defied the decision and threatened to make the province a federal one, which means having the ability to administrate its own affairs without the interference of the central government (Adraenses 2011). In addition, members of parliament were given the right to join the higher studies programmes, exempted from the normal conditions of acceptance (such as age, degrees and scientific qualifications). This move deprived the young, intelligent and qualified graduates from joining these programmes. It is worth mentioning that the ministry under the present minister Mr. Ali al-Adib (2010–) formally qualified graduates from low-level religious institutions, especially Iranian ones, as holders of approved university degrees, allowing them to join postgraduate programmes (al-Jbouri 2010).

The appointment of unqualified people to teach in the universities led to negative results for the universities. A case in point was the decision by the minister of higher education in 2005, Dr. Sami al-Mudhafar, to supposedly increase working opportunities and to decrease the percentage of unemployed. He decided to appoint the holders of MA and Ph.D. degrees to universities. The increase in the number appointed in a very short time was a form of disguised unemployment, as most of the newly appointed did not have the skill or the qualifications needed. In the meantime, the sudden increase in the number of academic staff became a burden on the academic institutions. More important was the fact that a lot of the newcomers were backed by political parties. Thus, these newcomers had more opportunity and influence, more than the old and experienced members of staff. They were soon to become even more influential as most professional academics departed because of the security situation (Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education 2005). To overcome the problem of over-employment, Ali al-Adib decided that all teaching staff who reached the age of 65 must retire. Most of those retired are professors and graduates of European, US and other respected foreign institutions. They were replaced by juniors, most of whom are graduates of Iraqi universities and speak no language except Arabic. In one decision, the Iraqi universities

were deprived of the experience and knowledge of these senior and experienced members, as the retired were not allowed to claim Emeritus status. This decision also deprived the postgraduate students of the expertise of these senior professors who were forced to give up their supervision to inexperienced tutors (Salih 2014).

The long-awaited assistance by the United States to the Iraqi universities has never materialized. The science and medical colleges which were in more need of materials, as well as other hospitals, were, at least until 2010, working with materials imported under the sanctions. All the faculties, especially the science ones, are short of equipment, laboratories, materials and financial support. Dr. Taher Al-Bakaa, the former president of al-Mustansiriyah University 2003–2004 and the former minister of higher education 2004–2005, commented that 'Iraq had received almost no funding for research since the occupation. Buildings destroyed during the Gulf War of 1991 were rebuilt in two months' time under the Hussein regime, yet the Americans have repaired nothing' (Baker 2011). One head of a physics department in al-Nahrain University in 2010 agreed and said; 'Not a single penny was spent on satisfying the needs of these faculties, we kept on working with the old laboratories which we had before 2003.' This caused the closure of many faculties and courses for higher studies, he added (Ahmed 2010).

Not only was there a failure to attract foreign assistance and obstacles in establishing links with foreign universities, there were also internal restrictions and obstacles in the way of developing the higher education system for researchers. Some critics saw in the new permanent Iraqi constitution (approved in 2005) another impediment in the way of scientific research, especially postgraduate research. Article 9 stated that:

The Iraqi Government shall respect and implement Iraq's international obligations regarding the non-proliferation, non-development, non-production, and non-use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, and shall prohibit associated equipment, materiel, technologies, and delivery systems for use in the development, manufacture, production, and use of such weapons.

(Iraqi Constitution 2005)

Critics saw in this article an obstacle in the way of Ph.D. and MA science students, especially in chemical and nuclear engineering, to do any project that involved the use of chemical, biological or nuclear materials. As early as 1991, WMD inspectors (UNESCOM) banned all chemistry, physics and other sciences educational materials. They also inspected university laboratories and libraries to confiscate and burn books on chemistry (Zangana 2009). As for postgraduate students in the field of humanities, there were other restrictions especially in choosing the subjects for their research. Most of them preferred courses and subjects in politics, history, sociology and even economics related to religious and sometimes sectarian subjects to guarantee their approval. Needless to say that such courses and research will only produce graduates with a limited way of thinking and parochial minds, and this will be reflected in the new generation of students when these people start teaching in the university. Under such circumstances (foreign hesitation and internal restriction) one cannot expect the Iraqi higher education system to develop or progress nor could one expect this system to be beneficial for nation building.

## **WOMEN ACADEMICS BETWEEN SECTARIAN POLICY AND THEIR SECURITY**

The insecure and chaotic situation after the invasion divided the universities along sectarian lines. Each university fell under the influence of one militia or a political party. Women academics and female students also suffered from assassinations, threats against leaving their dwelling areas or forced to flee to another country. As one female professor said

I was obliged to flee because I was threatened to be killed. When I ignored these threats one of my sons was kidnapped and tortured. Finally I had to heed these serious threats and leave my job and Iraq altogether.

(Al-Azzawi 2013)

Also, between 2003 and 2008, all female academics and female students were forced to wear hijab by the militias controlling their institutions. At the same time all the universities imposed on women academics and female students the style of clothes they should wear: no trousers, no jeans, no short sleeves and so on. Of course, women academics were suffering from these interferences even in their living areas, along with all the women. One academic electrical engineer female in the Technology University in Baghdad said

I had to wear hijab in very difficult circumstances because the [rules of the Iraqi streets] forced me to do so. I suffered a lot in my area because I was not wearing hijab, even taxis refused to stop for me because I was not wearing one. Therefore I had to wear it not because I believed in it but because I feared for my life if I didn't.

(Al-Enizy 2013)

The appointments of heads of universities were according to the sectarian quota system. Over time this challenge was extended to differentiate between women academics according to their sects, employment, grants, teaching, conferences abroad, workshops and training. There were no female heads of universities, and the overwhelming majority of deans were men. When women were chosen as deans or heads of departments, this was done on either a sectarian basis or a sectarian quota, not according to scientific qualifications. As one female academic said,

We had a vacant position for head of department. This position was given to a male junior lecturer who had very limited experience, while there were more senior women academics, full professors or senior lecturers who were more qualified for the post.

(Al-Enizy 2013)

The Ministry of Higher Education claims that under the present minister, al-Adib, the percentage of women in leadership positions has increased by 300 per cent, and the number of women deans increased from 10 to 35. In January 2014, a woman was appointed as head of Tikrit University, the first woman academic to occupy such a post (Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education 2012).

The interference of the Ministry of the Higher Education in academic rules continues, and the best example is the case of failing students. For the first

time in Iraqi education history, failing students were given the right to sit three or four times for their final examinations, until they passed. This only resulted in producing weak graduates and disrespected academics staff. As one female professor in a medical college said

I applied for pension earlier than I should because I couldn't continue serving in a college that has students who are more powerful than the teaching staff, and where postgraduate students insist on passing their exams whether we like it or not. In some cases failing students in the final exams have obtained their degrees despite the objections of the teaching staff. If such a thing is happening in a medical college one could imagine what is happening in other fields of knowledge such as the humanities. That is why I retired and left my job and the country altogether.

More harming perhaps was the Prime Minister al-Maliki's decision to exempt from any punishment those who produced forged higher degrees, despite the fact that they acquired high positions through these forged degrees. It should be said that vast majority of those with forged degrees are male.

Some European and American universities offered some fellowships to faculty and students to follow their studies abroad, but most females who applied failed to qualify for three major reasons: first are Iraqi traditions which do not accept the idea of women living abroad alone; second is the issuing of a visa for those who are chosen to travel, as most immigration offices in the West fear that whoever is granted a visa will seek asylum and will not return to Iraq; and the third is the poor command of a foreign language. All these reasons helped males to take these opportunities and leave their female colleagues without any chance of developing their careers.

### **HOW THE IRAQI HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM COULD BE IMPROVED: A FUTURISTIC OUTLOOK**

The future of any higher education system depends on three different aspects: practice, policy and philosophy. The main problem is the country's policy towards higher education (Brubacher 1965). During the Baathist period in Iraq, the philosophy of higher education was closely linked to the policy of the regime and its ideology. Under that system, higher education system became subservient to the political system, and not the other way round. For example, instead of the regime depending on the advice of higher education, the latter was made to serve the regime. Unfortunately, this problem was accentuated under the occupation and subsequent governments. Gradually, higher education became to serve conservative, sectarian, ethnic and religious purposes.

The other problem is that this system was divided in its loyalty between the different dominating political parties. Thus, the Kurdish universities are serving only Kurdish objectives while universities in the Shiite and Sunni areas do the same. Under such a policy the result is divisive and will not be able to serve a united Iraq. Since members of the higher education system contain mainly the young generation, we can confidently say that this generation will be divided by sect and narrow in its attitudes. In order to solve this problem, the higher education system, its institutions and curriculum should be independent and purely scientific. Also, the minister should be appointed from within the higher education system, someone who has served in the system and is fully acquainted with it.

Steps should be taken to stop the brain drain, and to encourage those who have left Iraq to return to their previous posts. The number of those who left Iraq to the occupation is so high that it has affected the standard of the higher education. It is true that the brain drain started during the war with Iran and the sanctions, but this was nothing compared to the number that left under the occupation, this is of course without mentioning those who were assassinated (al-Jalili 2006). Reversing the brain drain cannot succeed if the security situation and social services are not improved. In order to encourage those who left to come back special guarantees should be provided. The international community should help in this field by issuing a law that protects and provides immunity to scientists, academics and their institutions during war and crises. One positive factor has been the decision of Kurdish higher education institutions to host a number of Iraqi Arab academics. Although their number is small compared to those who left Iraq altogether, this decision has guaranteed close relations between Arab and Kurdish academics.

More harming to the higher education system has been the interference of the politics and religion. A good example is the Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office's decision in 2009 to allocate scholarships to postgraduate students. Also in 2009, while on a state visit to the United States, the prime minister signed 'a five-year, \$1 billion higher education plan to boost the nation's science and technology workforce while promoting knowledge-based sustainable development.' The prime minister signed an implementation agreement to establish an American Universities Iraq Consortium. The agreement to manage the plan was signed by al-Maliki, on behalf of the Iraqi government's committee for education development, and Stephen Moseley, president of the Washington-based Academy for Educational Development. This plan may look positive as it provides Iraqi students and society with opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge, but the fact remains that this plan was started in the wrong way. Instead of giving the Ministry of Higher Education the right to manage this plan, it was left to the prime minister's office to do that. Thus, this decision not only interferes with the Ministry of Higher Education but also has meant that the ministry has lost its independence and the right to do what it regarded as its responsibilities. It should be reminded that a similar step was taken by the old regime when in 1987 the newly established Saddam University (al-Nahrain after 2003) was attached directly to the presidency and not to the ministry, with special rules administrating its work and conditions for accepting students.

As for religion, one can only state that the interference of the religious-conservative parties, and sometimes the domination of these parties of most of the higher education institutions, has only managed to restrict the liberties of tutors and researchers to act scientifically. To start with ministers of higher education should be chosen from holders of acknowledged degrees (technocrats) and not members of the religious-conservative parties.

Gender differentiation in the academic field is more acute in Iraq today than at any time before. Also, the sectarian affiliations are more powerful than the scientific degrees, the experience and expertise women academics hold. This differentiation has prevented women academics from acquiring the positions they deserve in the administration of higher education.

Iraqi universities and higher education institutes have suffered considerably under the many wars, the sanctions, the occupation, assassination and the widespread corruption that overwhelmed the country. In order to tackle the damage a special plan and budget should be allocated to higher education.

The official Iraqi estimate of the annual cost to improve higher education can be found at: <http://www.moheer.gov.iq>

It should be noted that Iraq alone cannot shoulder this great task; the international community, especially the United States and Europe, who have a direct responsibility in this matter, as well as UNESCO, should be involved. Any budget should be divided between improving teaching facilities and encouraging and supporting research.

In the 2013 International Ranking of Universities, the Iraqi universities' ranks were very low. The first Iraqi university was named as Thi Qar University, which ranked 4647 (out of 11,992) among global universities and 74 (out of 993) among Arab universities. The mother and main university, Baghdad University, was ranked 4783 among international universities and 78 among Arab universities (Ranking Web of Universities 2014). For the standard of the Iraqi universities before 2003, see UNESCO study (2004).

Steps should be taken to increase the number of grants for postgraduate studies abroad. It is true that the present government has been sending a number of postgraduates abroad to specialize, but this programme was highly criticized because it depended on nepotism and favoured members of certain parties or the parliament. It also favoured male to female academics.

A shorter programme should be initiated for the junior faculty members to introduce them to new material and courses in their fields. The vast majority of these juniors have never left Iraq and have no knowledge about foreign universities, foreign language or new teaching methods.

Appointments to leading positions in the universities should depend on qualification and scientific title, regardless of their ethnic group, religion, sect and gender.

Finally, the constitution should contain an article preserving the independence of the universities and their right to conduct their scientific and academic work without any interference from any ruling party or institution.

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### SUGGESTED CITATION

- Jawad, S. N. and Al-Assaf, S. I. (2014), 'The higher education system in Iraq and its future', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 8: 1, pp. 55–72, doi: 10.1386/jcis.8.1.55\_1

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