

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

March 25, 2012

Iraqi Universities Reach a Crossroads

Ambitious plans for reform could be thwarted by sectarian politics



Jamal Penjweny, Novus Select, for The Chronicle

The U. of Baghdad and other Iraqi universities are benefiting from bigger budgets and the return of refugee academics. But Sunnis and secular Shiites worry that academic standards and freedoms are still threatened by sectarianism and religious and political ideology.

By Ursula Lindsey

Eight years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and a few months after the withdrawal of the military forces from the country, Iraq's universities, devastated by years of dictatorship, sanctions, and war, are still struggling to recover. The security situation has improved since the deadly, dark days of 2006 and 2007, when the country teetered on the brink of sectarian war, hundreds of professors were assassinated, and thousands more fled the country.

Today some of those refugee scholars have returned. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has a bigger budget and new, ambitious plans. Iraqi universities are looking to the outside world, hoping that international partnerships will help them reform their curricula and retrain their staffs. The government is investing more in public scholarship programs to send thousands of graduate students to study abroad and make up the country's new teaching cadres.

On the other hand, Iraqi universities remain highly centralized, politicized, and in need of systemic reform. The country is ruled by parties representing Iraq's Shiite majority, which was discriminated against under Saddam Hussein. But today, Sunnis and secular Shiites worry that academic standards and freedoms are still threatened by sectarianism and religious and political ideology—just in reverse. They complain of discrimination and say that university appointments are being made on the basis of religious affiliation and political connections rather than academic qualifications.

"Before, the Baath Party was controlling all universities, and you had to be a high party official to be university president or dean," says Nadjé Al-Ali, a professor of gender studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, who has worked on several efforts to connect Iraqi academics with their counterparts in the region. "Now each political party controls a university—the only pluralism is the plurality of dictatorial parties that are using the same methods to exert control."



Jamal Penjweny, Novus Select, for The Chronicle

Students listen to an instructor at Al Nahrain U., an elite technical institution in Baghdad. Because of problems with previous international partnerships, the university is moving forward on new projects slowly, in "turtle steps," its president says.

For many, a climate of fear persists. In recent months, two female academics have reportedly received anonymous threats for not wearing the *hijab*, or headscarf. The higher-education ministry has replaced presidents and deans at many universities, and fired hundreds of university employees for having ties to Hussein's disbanded Baath Party. Nearly every Iraqi academic interviewed for this article asked to remain anonymous, citing fears of physical harm or of retaliation from their superiors.

Politics and Academics

Political and sectarian fault lines, in fact, dominate every aspect of the country's public life today.

Ali al-Adeeb, the higher-education minister, is a polarizing figure among both Sunnis and secular Shiites. He is a high-ranking member of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa (or Islamic Call) Party, which has a religious, pro-Shiite ethos.

Since coming into office in 2011, Mr. al-Adeeb has made a number of controversial decisions, including recognizing the degrees of graduates of Iranian religious universities as equivalent to those

of Iraqi universities and firing hundreds of ministry and university employees for having ties to the Baath Party.

Some say that such de-Baathification efforts, eight years after Saddam's ouster, are just politically motivated personnel changes. Last October, after 144 employees of Tikrit University were fired, President Ali Saleh Hussein resigned in protest. "Those affected by this decision have professional qualification that are difficult to replace; removing such a large number of employees prevents the university from carrying out its basic mission," Mr. Hussein said in an interview with the pan-Arab *Al-Hayat* newspaper in October. The president complained of constant pressure and interference from the higher-education ministry, and of implied sectarian quotas that "cast their shadows over every institution in the country, including the university."

The ministry has also overseen major changes in administrative personnel, replacing deans and presidents with people who, critics say, have links to the parties in the ruling Shiite coalition.

But during a recent visit to Washington, Mr. al-Adeeb defended his ministry's actions, saying it had removed administrators "who abused their authority," were connected to the former regime, or were no longer effective. The allegation that the ministry is pushing a political agenda "is only propaganda," said Mr. al-Adeeb. "Because I belong to the Dawa party they think I only bring people from the Dawa party. This is not true."

Zuhair Humadi, executive director of the Iraq Education Initiative, which sends Iraqi students to pursue graduate degrees abroad, says the complaints are just sour grapes: "Unfortunately, changes occur, and people who are at the losing end of it will make all sorts of accusations that they are discriminated against."

A professor who asked to be identified by the pseudonym Amir teaches engineering at a university in Baghdad that has recently seen widespread personnel changes. "The deans who were replaced were outstanding scientists," he says, "who served the university for many years. Instead of being tenured they were replaced by people who are not qualified."

"The Ministry of Education has to be independent and not be with any political party in Iraq," says Mr. Amir. "It has to be secular. There are many Iraqis who want to get the wheel spinning; political interference slows us down. Give us an independent university, and you'll see what Iraqi scientists can do."

Mr. al-Adeeb says making universities more autonomous is one of his priorities. In 2011, he says, he instituted changes giving institutions greater control over their budgets, international agreements, and admission procedures.

Several professors and administrators *The Chronicle* spoke with defended the higher-education ministry, saying it was working to improve conditions at universities and that it was less politicized than other parts of the government. In fact, opinions on the situation at Iraqi universities tend to be starkly divided, and not just along sectarian lines, although often so.

Hayder Touran Assafli and Ahmad, two Iraqi graduate students studying abroad, have diametrically opposed views of the state of higher education in their home country. Mr. Assafli is pursuing a master's degree in electrical engineering at the University of Missouri on a full scholarship from the Iraqi Education Initiative. He thinks that at universities back home "everything is falling into place... every year something gets resolved."

Mr. Assafli, who belongs to Iraq's Turkmen minority, graduated at the top of his class from a technical university in Baghdad. But he believes that under Saddam Hussein he would never have had the necessary connections to apply for a government scholarship. "I never expected I could apply for a scholarship online and be accepted," he says.

Ahmad, who asked to go by a pseudonym, is pursuing a doctoral degree abroad and has a much gloomier view. Family and friends tell him, "It's not good to come back. It's getting worse day after day," he says. Specifically, it's getting worse for Sunni Muslims—like Ahmad—Iraq's once-ruling religious minority. "They are trying to push out of the Iraqi education system and all other public sectors," he says.

Ahmad says when he worked at his university he was asked to fill out extensive bibliographical forms that were designed, he believes, to ascertain his religious sect.

A Lost Generation in Academe

Politics, though, is just one stumbling block in Iraq's pursuit of higher-education reform. After Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime took power in 1968, it poured huge amounts of the country's oil revenue into higher education. Iraqi professors and scientists pursued degrees abroad, and the country's university system—despite political repression—acquired a reputation as one of the region's most modern and dynamic.

But during the 1990s an estimated 10,000 Iraqi academics left the country as salaries plummeted and universities were crippled by sanctions imposed on Hussein's regime. After the 2003 invasion many universities were looted—some lost their entire libraries—and in the years that followed, universities were able to function only intermittently. Several thousand more professors went into exile to escape political and sectarian violence. It was often the most senior, visible academics who were threatened.

The recent improvement in security conditions, wrote Mr. al-Adeeb in an e-mail to *The Chronicle*, has allowed Iraqi universities to regain "their capacity to grow and develop." Approximately 100,000 undergraduate students and 4,500 graduate students are enrolled in 25 public universities today (and another 100,000 students in the semiautonomous Kurdish region).

The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund estimates that about a third of the threatened academics whom it helped leave the country in recent years have returned.

Another Iraqi professor who asked to use only a fictitious first name, Ali, is back at his old university in Baghdad. He had fled the country several years ago after receiving threatening letters from a militia group.

"Nowadays they are trying to supply the colleges with what they need," he says. "They are starting real rebuilding." His department asked for several million dollars worth of new equipment last year, he says, and received more funds than it had requested. And his university has set up quality-assurance and international-accreditation units.

Yet Ali requested anonymity because of his fear that any sort of public profile could attract unwanted attention.

"The problem is not related to academia," he says. "It's a pure security problem. The country is not calm until now. There are people thinking in a twisted way. All the people who want to speak, want to keep their names secret. Famous people are afraid of being kidnapped. Nobody wants to attract any attention."

Others complain that the general shift toward social conservatism and religious militancy that has swept Iraqi society has overtaken universities.

"There is a struggle between religious and liberal thought on campuses," says a young female Iraqi academic who asked not to be identified. "Islamists think they have the upper hand and the right to monitor and control others, which makes it hard for liberals to present their ideas without fear."

Although violence has receded from university campuses, in recent months suicide bombers have targeted pilgrims and police cadets in devastating attacks. Still, says Ali, when he left Iraq, "you were at risk 80 percent of the time and safe 20 percent." Now it's the opposite. "Sometimes I feel professors outside Iraq have no idea what's going on here," he says. "It's not very quiet, it's not very calm. But it's going well. We are graduating students. Our system is OK. I see Iraqi [expatriate] professors talking on TV and I think they are too negative. If they return, I think they can help."

Despite the return of professors like Ali, Iraq has lost a generation of academics. Many of those who left are elderly now and are unlikely to come back. Some say that—despite official entreaties to return—their posts have been filled and they aren't really welcome anymore. And those who stayed, cut off for decades from the outside world, teach using antiquated materials and methods. They are often unable or unwilling to embrace reform.

"My challenge was with the staff: They didn't like to change," says Abdul Razak al-Essa, who served as president of the University of Kufa until 2010. He says the hardest part of his job was convincing faculty members that they needed to do more than deliver a few lectures—that they should have office hours, carry out research, and teach through seminars and workshops rather than "just by writing on the blackboard and reading to the students."

Lecturers' salaries have risen at least 200 percent, to as much as \$3,000 a month. And since 2003, the number of Iraqi faculty members has increased from 13,000 to over 36,000, says Yahya al-Kubaisi, an Iraqi researcher who now works with an education think tank in Jordan.

But this increase in quantity does not necessarily entail one in quality, argues Mr. al-Kubaisi, who has written several research papers critical of Iraq's higher-education-reconstruction strategies. "Most of faculty are inexperienced master's-degree holders who graduated inside Iraq," he says. Some reportedly have only bachelor's degrees.

Mr. al-Kubaisi also believes that the international community has neglected higher education in Iraq—committing a small fraction of the funds international groups had estimated would be necessary to rebuild the sector. He argues that the ministry of higher education spends a disproportionate amount of its budget on operational costs rather than on rebuilding the labs, libraries, and other facilities that universities desperately need.

Of the ministry's 2012 budget of \$2.6-billion (2.6 percent of the national budget), he notes, 84 percent will go to operational costs and only 16 percent to capital investments.

Mr. al-Adeeb says that one of his biggest challenges is the ministry's limited budget, which "is very small in relation to what Iraqi higher education needs." One of the solutions, the minister suggested, is to encourage the private sector to invest in universities.

Looking Outward

In its latest strategic plan, Mr. al-Adeeb's ministry announced it will create 15 specialized regional universities focused on fields like petroleum studies, applied engineering, environmental studies, agriculture, and medicine. The creation of these future universities and the reform of existing ones depends to a large degree on foreign assistance.

"We have a great knowledge gap created over the past three decades," Mr. al-Adeeb said in an e-mail, "and it is the moral mission of the developed world to help us to increase the speed of scientific development in Iraq."

Iraqi universities are being encouraged to seek out foreign partners to help them train staff and overhaul their curricula. While Mr. al-Essa headed the University of Kufa, it established a partnership with the University of Leicester, in England, to update the curriculum of the college of medicine and a link with the University of Kentucky to overhaul the departments of civil engineering, business, and English.

"Before 2003 we didn't have any links to universities outside Iraq," he says. "Now we have to depend on the people from outside Iraq. We see how they do their lectures, the books they are using." (See related article, Page A17.)

In the last year in Iraq "there has been movement forwards," says Jim Miller, executive director of the Scholar Rescue Fund. "There is more openness to other countries, more interest in training programs."

But partnerships are still dogged by security and logistical problems.

His university is exploring a number of foreign partnerships, says Mohammed Jabir Ali, president of the elite technical Al Nahrain University, in Baghdad. But they are purposely proceeding by "turtle steps."

"The president before me established so many initiatives, but it never worked out," says Mr. Ali. "The projects were not studied very well; the people in charge were not serious enough; there were timing and cultural differences, and very little follow-up."

Most partnerships remain concentrated in the semi-independent enclave of Kurdistan, which has been much safer and more stable than the rest of the country and which has seen [a boom](#) in new public and private universities.

Salahaddin University, in Kurdistan, has over 80 agreements with universities around the world, says Mohammed Aziz Saeed, director of academic relations. "We are now developing very fast in the higher-education sector," he says. "We are open to the rest of the world."

One of Salahaddin's most important partnerships is with the University of Cincinnati and includes the establishment of a career center, faculty exchanges, and reviewing the Kurdish university's English-language and economics curricula.

Public Relations?

But some argue that trying to reform higher education through foreign partnerships is a piecemeal solution.

"These programs are just a kind of public relations," says Mr. al-Kubaisi, the higher-education researcher. Sending a few dozen Iraqi academics for a few weeks' training in the United States is not enough to change the methodologies and practices of entire departments, he argues. He notes that the funds involved are often very modest and that the universities don't usually carry out impact studies.

"The main thing that needs to be done is to discuss the whole system," says Mr. al-Kubaisi. "All these actions and partnerships and talk about reform will amount to nothing if we don't talk about decentralization ... about the independence of universities, about funding. We try to make small changes in the procedures and not in the whole system, and that is the problem."

Another important thrust to Iraq's reform efforts is the plan to send thousands of Iraqi graduate students, like Mr. Assafli, to study and catch up on the latest scientific advances abroad. "The whole strategy depends on the people who will come from outside," says Mr. al-Essa, the former University of Kufa president.

Kurdish authorities have allocated \$100-million and the Iraqi ones \$350-million to send 10,000 students each to pursue graduate studies abroad.

For Iraqi students at American and other foreign universities, different teaching methodologies take getting used to. Mr. Assafli remembers a professor explaining to him that he should use a reference sheet of formulas during his exams, rather than memorize them. "He said it wasn't cheating. What matters is using the formulas."

"It's more of a critical thinking way of education," says Kawther Khalid Ahmed, who is studying pharmaceuticals at the University of Iowa. "They are not testing you on materials they want you to memorize. Classes and applied research are integrated. In Iraq there's a fixed curriculum—here it's more of a selection."

Ms. Ahmed graduated third in her class from Baghdad's College of Pharmacy in 2004, but says that without a foreign degree she would have to wait many years to advance in Iraq's seniority-based university system.

When she returns home, she would like to see "more chances to people who really want to work regardless of who graduated first and is older," and "more advanced labs and more advanced

technology. I know we might not be able to involve these technologies in our work for 10 years, but we need to at least be aware of them." At Iraqi universities, says Mr. Assafli, "the problem isn't money—but knowing what to buy for the labs, and how to use them."

The Iraqi government has repeatedly announced its intention to send thousands of students abroad, starting in 2005. But the scholarship program has run into many problems, like little assistance for students navigating the admission process, complicated bureaucracy and problems obtaining visas, and poor financial and logistical support for students once they are abroad. There are two different programs at the moment—one run by the higher-education ministry, another by the prime minister's office. So far, only about 1,500 students have traveled abroad on both programs combined.

"There is a big push to send students abroad, but the quality of applications is still very problematic," says Kate Robertson, Iraq program manager for the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics. The future of higher education in Iraq will be "a battle between those who do manage to get out and do manage to come back with good ideas and methods, and the quality that is spiraling down" in the country, adds Ms. Robertson.

Many Iraqis share Ms. Robertson's concern and a sense of urgency about putting their universities back on the right track.

"My country went from war to war, and there was no time for education," says Mr. Assafli, the Iraqi student at the University of Missouri. "Now is the time."

Ian Wilhelm contributed to this article from Washington.
