

Iraq: OP-ED: Illiteracy Rate in Iraq Climbs among Highest in the Region

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One in five Iraqis between the ages of 10 and 49 cannot read or write a simple statement related to daily life[1]. While Iraq boasted a record low illiteracy rate for the Middle East in the 1980s, illiteracy jumped to at least 20% in 2010[2]. Moreover, illiteracy among women in Iraq, at 24%, is more than double that of men (11%)[3]. As the Iraq Liaison for the international NGO Mercy Corps pointed out, "there are some locations-particularly rural locations-where the illiteracy rates are actually much higher. Illiteracy rates among women in some communities can be as high as 40-50%."

Iraq was considered a reputable model for education in the Arab world only a few decades ago. Shortly after hosting the 1976 "Baghdad Conference for the Eradication of Illiteracy"-in which Arab leaders and international experts discussed the potential for progressive educational reforms in the region-the Ba'athist-led Iraqi government passed the Compulsory Education Law. Children between the ages of 6 and 15 were required to attend state schools; those who violated this law would have to serve time in state prison. This law helped raise the literacy rate in many governorates and strengthened the Iraqi state's role as the chief maintainer and supervisor of the free public education system. Consequently, UNESCO estimated that primary schools had nearly a 100% gross enrollment attendance rate in the 1980s and much of the 1990s.[4]

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OP-ED

Illiteracy Rate in Iraq Climbs among Highest

One in five Iraqis between the ages of 10 and 49 cannot read or write a simple statement related to daily life in the Middle East in the 1980s, illiteracy jumped to at least 20% in 2010[2]. Moreover, illiteracy among women in the Middle East (11%)[3]. As the Iraq Liaison for the international NGO Mercy Corps pointed out, “there are some locations—where illiteracy rates are actually much higher. Illiteracy rates among women in some communities can be as high as 40-50%.”

Iraq was considered a reputable model for education in the Arab world only a few decades ago. Shortly after the “Eradication of Illiteracy”—in which Arab leaders and international experts discussed the potential for progress in Iraq, the Iraqi government passed the Compulsory Education Law. Children between the ages of 6 and 15 were required to attend school. This law helped raise the literacy rate in many governorates. The Ministry of Education is the maintainer and supervisor of the free public education system. Consequently, UNESCO estimated that the average school attendance rate in the 1980s and much of the 1990s.[4]

The 1990s ushered in a period of war and deprivation countrywide. In 1990, the UN Security Council passed a resolution imposing severe international economic sanctions of the later 20th century against Iraq. For thirteen years, the international community, led by the US and other powerful nations—blocked numerous staple items from entering Iraq. The banned items included everything from pencils and books to computers.

Moreover, as a result of the sanctions, most Iraqi students and scholars were unable to study or teach and the government denied requests for research materials. While enrollment and literacy rates remained high throughout the 1990s, the government neglected[5]. Education fell as a priority while the Iraqi government sought to address more urgent concerns, such as the needs of the general public.

Shortly after the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the UN Security Council ended sanctions against Iraq. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)—to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of the Ba’athist government—“de-Ba’athification,” the CPA essentially ordered that former Ba’ath party members be removed from many jobs in the educational sector. Most teachers and educational administrators had belonged to the Ba’ath party, in many cases. “After de-Ba’athification,” many teachers and administrators with Ba’athist affiliations were fired or arrested. Many were assassinated, mainly by death squads targeting voices for human rights, between 2003 and 2010[6]. The loss of these academics has led to a ‘brain drain’ in Iraq; since 2003, thousands of teachers and scholars—particularly in the north—have left the country.

In addition to a lack of qualified and experienced teachers, attendance and enrollment in public schools has declined since the invasion of Iraq. Before the invasion, gross school attendance was estimated at nearly 100%[7]. But in 2003 alone, more than 2 million Iraqis were displaced by the American-led invasion and its chaotic aftermath. This destruction and insecurity certainly discouraged school attendance. Between 2006 and 2007, the most intense period of civil war and violence, the Iraqi government estimated that about 10% of schools were destroyed. American and coalition troops, as well as local militias, occupied many schools in that period; this resulted in a significant drop in attendance.

The civil war, a period of considerable hardship, perhaps most acutely affected women’s education. Many parents have security concerns, especially with a lack of transportation and far distances between many schools and homes. “There are household needs, and girls are often required to help with household chores, and to help with household chores,” explained the Iraq Liaison for Mercy Corps. Many parents have stopped sending their daughters—to school while the security situation remains fragile or deteriorates in some areas. However, gross school attendance has slowly but steadily risen to about 45% in 2010, partly due to some recent security improvements. Both Mercy Corps and Anwar Al-Azari, Director of the local NGO Nour, represent the general consensus that the government should invest in educational facilities and build additional schools that provide safe drinking water and functioning bathrooms.

schools were needed and between 6,000 and 7,000 schools needed rehabilitation^[10]. After seven years these figures are likely much higher. As a result of the school facilities shortage, teachers frequently classroom. Some teachers opt to work in multiple shifts, and are generally poorly compensated. The curriculum updated, and education for girls should be prioritized.

“In order to fully participate in the rebuilding of Iraq and to claim their rights as citizens of a democracy, it is noted the Iraq Liaison. Yet reviving Iraq’s educational system is a formidable task. “It is difficult to prioritize filled.” As more pockets of Iraq transition from a state of humanitarian emergency towards a phase of increase funds towards Iraq’s educational facilities and structures. Adequate and sustainable assistance exceed—its former reputation as the intellectual and educational capital of the Arab world.

[1] The United Nations defines an illiterate person as “someone who cannot, with understanding, both read and write in everyday life. A person who can only read but not write, or can write but not read is considered to be illiterate. A person whose name or a memorized ritual phrase is also not considered literate.”

[2] “Literacy in Iraq Fact Sheet.” *United Nations Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit*. 15 Sept. 2007. <<http://reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/EGUA-89BSWF?OpenDocument>>.

[3] “Literacy in Iraq Fact Sheet.” *United Nations Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit*. 15 Sept. 2007. <<http://reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/EGUA-89BSWF?OpenDocument>>.

[4] “Education in Iraq Fact Sheet.” *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. 28 Mar. 2007. URL_ID=11216&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html>.

[5] “Iraqi Education System Caught in Crossfire of Continued Conflict.” *Public Broadcasting Service*. 12 Feb. 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/middle_east/iraq/jan-june07/infrastructure_02-12.htm>.

[6] “Stop the Assassination of Iraq Academics.” *Brussels Tribunal and CEOSI*. Last updated on 30th Aug. 2007. <<http://www.brusselstribunal.org/Academics.htm>>.

[7] “Iraqi Education System Caught in Crossfire of Continued Conflict.” *Public Broadcasting Service*. 12 Feb. 2007. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/middle_east/iraq/jan-june07/infrastructure_02-12.htm>.

[8] “Education for All by 2015: Will We Make it?” *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. <<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001548/154820e.pdf>>.

[9] “Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq: Facts and Figures.” *United Nations OCHA*. 13 Nov. 2007. <<http://www.unocha.org/iraq/in%20Iraq%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20131107.pdf>>.

[10] UNICEF lauds Iraqi “commonsense” push to return to school. *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. <http://www.unicef.org/media/media_7707.html>.

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