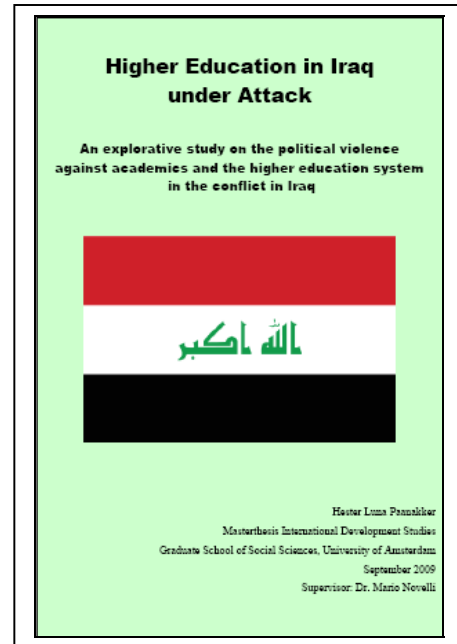


Higher Education in Iraq under Attack

An explorative study on the political violence against academics and the higher education system in the conflict in Iraq

Hester Luna Paanakker MSc
Masterthesis International Development Studies
Graduate School of Social Sciences
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Summary



Introduction

Since the US occupation of Iraq in May 2003, academics started to be specifically and deliberately targeted through various forms of political violence (O'Malley 2007). It is estimated that almost 300 academics have been killed since the occupation, and they faced many additional violations of their rights such as forced displacement, detention, death threats and abduction (O'Malley 2007:8). The exodus of intellectuals since 2003 as a result of the violence and the threat thereof is of an unprecedented scale (Weiss Fagen 2007:4, Harb 2008:5). Moreover, the political violence continues to be employed against academics until now, and seems to be targeted at the whole higher education sector in general. These alarming developments occur in an Iraq in which a persistent conflict rages. Under the lead of the US, a struggle for political power and control in Iraq has evolved between many different groups, including the US itself (Tripp 2004, Erdbrink and Roelants 2007); a struggle in which higher education and its academics seem to suffer disproportionately (O'Malley 2007:8).

Although the issue is increasingly acknowledged as a serious problem that needs to be addressed, the precise scale, nature and dynamics of political violence against Iraqi academics remain largely unknown and thorough research on its root causes and impact remains largely absent (Harb 2008:5, O'Malley 2007).

From a theoretical perspective, there is a growing recognition of the widespread phenomenon of political violence against the education community and a growing consensus on the importance of

determining the complex relationship between conflict and education (O'Malley 2007, Davies 2004, 2005). It is widely acknowledged that to address conflict it is of the utmost importance to also address education and vice versa: conflict is argued to impact on education and alternatively, education is argued to impact on conflict (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008, Davies 2004, 2005). The existing literature on education and conflict reveals that education can either exacerbate or mitigate violence and conflict (Bush and Saltarelli 2000, Davies 2004, 2005). Nevertheless, relatively few studies are available on the topic and even less on the specific topic of the how, what and why of political violence against academics and possible solutions to tackle the problem (Novelli 2008:7), thus leaving a theoretical gap that needs to be filled and with respect to the Iraq case a practical problem that needs further exploration.

The central question of this study is:

How do Iraqi academics perceive the scale, nature and dynamics of political violence against them in post-2003 occupied Iraq and how do they perceive the relationship between the current conflict situation and higher education?

Research design and purpose

This study reviews the existing body of literature on education, conflict and political violence, and contains the results of an explorative and in-depth empirical research into this topic in Iraq. The empirical research was conducted in Jordan and Syria from February 2009 until May 2009 by means of a case study among Iraqi academics that have mostly fled Iraq at some point after the US invasion of 2003 and have found refuge in Jordan and Syria. In total 12 interviews were held with and 12 questionnaires were completed by Iraqi academics. Lastly, various types of documents were studied, analyzed and incorporated in sketching the background to the conflict, political violence and higher education in Iraq.

Besides the theoretical relevance of this study in exploring a case that is exemplary for the widespread and profound political violence against academics and the analysis of which may therefore provide useful insights to further theoretical knowledge on the interrelatedness of (higher) education, political violence and conflict, the study is also, and more importantly, highly relevant from a practical and humanitarian point of view. It is of the utmost importance that the political violence against academics in Iraq and its relation to education and conflict is made more insightful. More thorough and detailed knowledge about the features of, rationale behind and impact of the political violence against Iraqi academics is required, because with this essential knowledge it is hoped that this disturbing phenomenon will be more fully acknowledged and can be more adequately addressed. In this way, this study seeks and hopes to make a humble

contribution to putting a halt to the continuation of inflicted harm on Iraqi academics and the Iraqi higher education system.

Main findings

As a result of the main research question and its subquestions, the findings of this study are threefold. Firstly, it discusses what the perceived impact of the political violence and conflict is on higher education. Secondly, what the perceived scale, nature and dynamics of political violence against academics are, and thirdly, what the perceived impact of higher education on the political violence and conflict is.

Impact of the political violence and conflict on higher education

As to the impact of the conflict on higher education, it is pointed out that academics perceive that the conflict, or more specifically the occupation, has strongly affected the functioning of higher education, and in detrimental ways only. They explain that the role of higher education has become and continues to be extremely marginalized as a direct consequence of the occupation, and the positive role it had prior to the occupation in advancing Iraqi society has been wiped out. This is mainly due to the politicization of the system, which is characterized by the take-over of universities by political parties and militias exercising sectarian practices and by a political environment hostile towards academics and higher education. Respondents declare that the US, the Iraqi government and the militias have politicized educational content and have politicized the way in which the higher education system is organized, managed and run, and in which favoritism, selectivity, repressiveness and corruption on the bases of sectarianism now prevail. This has fostered an environment in which the large-scale and specific targeting of academics for political reasons takes place, and which has resulted in and is reflected by a complete degradation of higher education.

Scale, nature and dynamics of the political violence

As to the scale, nature and dynamics of political violence the most important findings are that the violence is perceived to be undoubtedly politically motivated and is not just targeted at academics, but targeted at the higher education system as a whole. In academics' opinion, the political violence has a fundamentally and undeniably political character: it is employed by actors that are part of the political power in Iraq and serves political interests or goals, as does the conflict at large.

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The scale of political violence seems to be a very wide and inclusive one: academics from different backgrounds, disciplines, position and age and gender have been targeted, and more importantly, the violence is targeted at the entire higher education system in general. It is argued that the nature of political violence does not only encompass direct forms such as the killing, threatening, kidnapping and intimidation of academics, but also repressive forms such as the politicization of higher education and expulsion from posts, a climate of impunity as an indirect form, and imposing living in fear on academics as a alienating form of political violence. With respect to the dynamics of political violence, the targeting of academics is perceived to be part of the targeting of higher education as a whole in a deliberate attempt to destroy the pillars the country is built on, and ultimately to destroy Iraq as a nation. The violence, and also the conflict in general, is believed to be initiated by the US, Iran and Israel, in order to eliminate Iraq as a strategic player in the region. Academics state that the US and Iran are still actively involved in promoting the violence (whereas Israel appears to be not) and state that they play the most dominant role in the violence up until now. Academics pinpoint that the perpetrators, or the actors that conduct the actual violence, are mainly the militias, being supported by the Iraqi government. The emergence of the political violence is explained to be enabled by the political opportunities the US and to a slightly lesser extent the Iraqi government have created in Iraq for Iran and the militias to gain power, and by the sufficient resource mobilization of militias by the US, Iran and the Iraqi government. It is demonstrated that these parties –the US, Iran, the Iraqi government and militias- are involved in a struggle for power and control in Iraq and employ political violence as a means to gain and maintain power by ruling out academics and by diminishing higher education's role: political violence, in all its forms, is used as a deliberate and explicit instrument of power. According to academics these actors have imposed sectarian divisions on Iraqi society and thereby harness religion and ethnicity to mobilize identities for conflict, and use the political violence to create and manipulate fear. It is strongly felt that the US is at the core of the current circumstances for their occupation has directly caused and continues to enable and support the emergence of political violence against academics and higher education, as a result of which higher education has become highly politicized and has deteriorated tremendously.

Impact of higher education on the political violence and conflict

As to the impact higher education has on the political violence and conflict, it is concluded that higher education has a severely negative impact only, due to its strongly politicized nature that is in support of the political goals behind the violence and conflict. The manners through which higher education is believed to reinforce or exacerbate the violence and conflict comprise repressive forms of political violence (imposed sectarianism in terms of imposed segregation and imposed fundamentalism, followed by curriculum change and propaganda for hatred, and then by

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a lack of freedom of speech) and indirect forms of political violence (a climate of impunity). Moreover, it is demonstrated that academic freedom is at the core of political violence against academics. Firstly, all forms of employed political violence –whether direct, indirect, repressive, or alienating violence- ultimately result in or are even specifically aimed at the restriction of academic freedom. Secondly, it is via this channel that academics perceive violence and conflict is reinforced and exacerbated. And thirdly, opposing the set restrictions on academic freedom is a major determinant of political violence: academics declare that who does so runs a great risk of being targeted. Academic freedom was defined as the freedom to learn, teach, think and work and to do so without any fear, or apprehension to face any repercussions for utilizing this freedom. The vast majority of respondents states that academic freedom is completely absent in Iraq nowadays and universities are completely rendered to the will of militias.

The vast majority of respondents also states higher education has no potential to contribute to the mitigation of violence and the establishment of peace because it continues to be deliberately hampered through the politicization of higher education by the occupation and its allies. Consequently, the majority of respondents states the termination of the occupation has top priority in every respect: priority in terms of improving the current state of higher education, priority in terms of enabling it to play a positive role in mitigating violence and conflict, and priority in terms of the conditions academics have to return to Iraq and resume their positions. Furthermore, academics declare that with the prevailing climate of impunity in which the violence against academics and against the higher education system can be employed unhindered and goes unpunished, any improvement of the situation is made impossible.

End note

The seriousness of the problem of political violence and the major negative impacts it has on higher education and Iraqi society in general needs to be acknowledged, and the deliberate strategy motivated by political interests to inflict harm on academics and the higher education system needs to be addressed. An opening to put a halt to the continuing deterioration of higher education and to restore its vital role in society can only be provided when the system is freed from the current political interference and instruction. And only then an opening is provided to protect academics and to curtail the highly disturbing large-scale violence against them.