

COMMENT

Liquidating Iraqi Academics

IRAQI SOCIETY WILL NEVER BE the same again. Nor will Iraqi politics be stable for decades to come. In terms of humanitarian crisis Iraq is likely to surpass the Vietnam tragedy and yet not much is heard about silent disintegration Iraqi Society is being subjected to day in and day out. Vietnamese are magnanimous in reconciling themselves with the American reality on their soil. But Iraqis are unlikely to show magnanimity towards American warlords in the future because they simply don't know how to look at the future. The social agony of Iraq goes well beyond war.

Iraq is the world's best-known conflict but the least well-known humanitarian crisis. The international community has only belatedly begun to acknowledge the extent of the greatest conflict induced displacement in the history of the Middle East. According to The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures, there are now 2.7 million internally displaced Iraqis and 2.2 million refugees, mostly in neighbouring states. One in six Iraqis is displaced. Over eight million Iraqis are in need of humanitarian assistance. A 2006 study published in the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* estimated 654,965 excess deaths in the four years following the US-led invasion of 2003. The prestigious British polling agency ORB estimated 1.2 million deaths in September 2007. The October 2010 estimate of Just Foreign Policy stands at + 1.4 million excess deaths.

A little known aspect of the tragedy is the systematic liquidation of Iraq's academics. Under the current occupation, Iraq's intellectual and technical class has been subject to a systematic and ongoing campaign of intimidation, abduction, extortion, random killings and targeted assassinations. Running parallel with the destruction of Iraq's educational infrastructure, this repression led to the mass forced displacement of the bulk of Iraq's educated middle class - the main engine of progress and development in modern states. The absence of this middle class has resulted in the breakdown of public services, affecting all sectors and layers of Iraqi society. The number of killings of Iraqi academics has continued to rise. By the end of 2006, the UK's *Independent* reported that over 470 academics had been killed, while *The Guardian* stated that the figure stood at 500 from Baghdad and Basra universities alone. By October 2010 there were 449 cases recorded on the B Russells Tribunal database. Even amid the horrifying levels of violence following the invasion in 2003, the killings of academics have stood out for their highly selective character. In the vast majority of cases it appears that the victims have been specifically singled out, either as the immediate target of professional assassins or as the object of so-called kidnappings, which resulted in their deaths.

The International Medical Corps reports that populations of teachers in Baghdad have fallen by 80%. Medical personnel also has left in disproportionate numbers. Roughly 40 percent of Iraq's middle class is believed to have fled by the end of 2006. Most are fleeing systematic persecution and have no desire to return.

The Iraqi education system, once the showcase of the Middle East, has virtually collapsed, following 13 years of international sanctions and 7 years of war and occupation. One in five Iraqis between the ages of 10 and 49 cannot read or write a simple statement related to daily life. While Iraq boasted a record low illiteracy rate for the Middle East in the 1980s, illiteracy jumped to at least 20% in 2010 and is among the highest in the region. Illiteracy rates among women in some communities are as high as 40-50%. Corruption is rampant. The Iraqi Interior Ministry has admitted that more than 9000 civil servants, including high ranking staff

in the prime minister's office, have provided purchased fake university degrees. Meanwhile, money assigned to the education sector has been diverted to "security". □□□