Iraq’s Shattered Universities

Baghdad—Najib Stipho, a chemical engineer and dean of Baghdad’s Al-Mansour University College, awoke at dawn on 9 April to the sound of pounding on his front door. His cafeteria manager had come to warn him that looters were threatening the 2600-student private institution. “I told him to get as many guards as he could,” recalls Stipho, who then raced to take up battle stations with his two grown sons as U.S. tanks and troops rolled into the city. Two days and 4000 bullets later, Stipho’s band of a dozen machine-gun–toting defenders had driven off the would-be looters. On 5 May the Christian university became the first in Iraq to reopen its doors.

But Al-Mansour’s survival is the exception among Iraq’s once-proud university system, already weakened by more than a decade of economic sanctions, brain drain, and political oppression. Scores of academic buildings around the country were bombed, looted, and burned during the U.S. invasion. Science departments were especially hard hit. Some were targeted by U.S. troops seeking evidence of complicity in developing weapons of mass destruction; others were plundered by mobs for their computers and scientific equipment.

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“Right now, Iraqi academics are struggling with a lack of everything, but in the long run I think they are hopeful,” says Stephen Curda, a higher education specialist working for the Department of Defense in Baghdad. So far, he says, the U.S. government has chipped in $270,000 to start rebuilding the technology university and allocated another $47,000 for repairs at Baghdad University, the country’s largest higher education institution. Rebuilding expertise and morale, however, may prove more difficult.

Easy pickings. Looters cleaned out Basra University and other Iraqi institutions of higher education after Saddam Hussein’s regime was toppled.

Classes may be back in session, but Iraq’s university system is largely wrecked after a decade of sanctions and repression, followed by war and mass looting

Mobbed

U.S. soldiers now guard the entrance to Baghdad University’s well-landscaped campus, which during a recent visit was thronged with male and female students. Sami Al-Mudafar, a biochemist, was elected acting president by the faculty on 17 May under the direction of U.S. officials. But basic school necessities—from books to lab equipment—are sorely lacking, and sporadic electricity, the threat of street violence, and a severe gasoline shortage are keeping many students and professors at home.

And the country’s flagship university was relatively lucky. Along with its medical school north of the city, it suffered only minor damage and looting, including the destruction of a medical library statue of Louis Pasteur after it was mistaken for Saddam Hussein. Al-Mustansiriya University, founded in the 13th century, was more seriously looted, but repentant thieves returned some of its furniture, books, and scientific equipment to a Shiite mosque in Sadr City, a poor neighborhood on Baghdad’s outskirts.

Stipho’s bold stand at Al-Mansour prevented the school’s 10 science, engineering, and computing labs and 300 computers from falling into the hands of looters. “They were desperate to get inside,” says Stipho, adding that the looters also tried unsuccessfully to snatch university cars and buses from a protected compound with a stolen crane. “They came in mobs: A group of 50 would come, then would go, and another would come.”

Other, more sprawling, campuses were left undefended. At the University of Technology, which was visited frequently before the war by United Nations weapons inspectors, several Iraqi academics claimed that U.S. forces actively encouraged mobs. “American troops opened the doors, and the looters took it completely,” says one student who lives near that university, an account repeated by Mazui Kadhum, a non-Baathist and former University of Technology professor who is now dean of informatics at Al-Nahrain University. “U.S. tanks broke the gate” and urged looters to enter, he says. Curda acknowledges that U.S. tanks may have caused a large breach in the wall but...
Kadhmu’s new institution, Al-Nahrain, formerly Saddam University, is an elite science and engineering school of some 1100 students that shares a campus with Baghdad University. Its generous salaries of up to $1000 month attracted some of the country’s best talent. It also attracted the prewar attention of U.N. weapons inspectors. When Al-Nahrain professors returned to the campus a week after U.S. troops arrived in Baghdad, they found Marines bivouacked on the site—and the offices of the science, engineering, and informatics deans ransacked, along with the laser and electronics laboratories. “Motherboards with information that may be of use were taken,” he says. “But they did it in a very unprofessional way; there was equipment that had nothing to do with computers that they threw on the floor.”

Kadhmu believes that the damage was done by the invading forces rather than looters, citing as evidence dusty prints of U.S. military boots left in the labs and offices and an unscathed office of the political science dean. “The Marines entered every place that the inspectors went to, they knew where they were going,” he adds. A U.S. Defense Department official in Baghdad declined to comment on the allegation.

Kadhmu does not deny that university professors did consulting work for a host of ministries—including the defense and military industry ministries. But he insists that the university did not host any weapons work. “They had their own laboratories, their own techniques, their own setup” through the Ministry of Military Industry, he says. “It was a country of its own, directly linked to the president.”

Rocketed science
Another school hit hard by the war is Al-Kufa University, south of Baghdad, which was visited as recently as 18 January by U.N. inspectors. “There was fighting, bombs, explosions, looters, and burning,” says Nabil Al-Rowi, an electrical engineer who until last month was president of the university, which has three campuses, nine colleges, and 10,000 students.

The trouble began 26 March, says Al-Rowi, when U.S. Marines reached Kufa, site of one of the three campuses. Staff members left after the Marines “broke in the doors and were searching for computers” in the areas visited by U.N. inspectors, he says. Looters caused additional damage in the first weeks of April after the Marines left, he says. A rocket attack on 3 April severely damaged the central administration building in Najaf, which he says was located next to the chief Baathist commander of the region. Three days later the medicine, pharmacy, and education departments were looted. “The microbiology, physiology, and health physics labs were burned, completely destroyed,” he says. Looters also made off with some 100 ancient manuscripts, including some pre-Islamic documents of the Nestorian Church. After rejoining his family in Baghdad, Al-Rowi was fired from his job because of his membership in the Baath Party.

Other institutions experienced varying amounts of damage. Eyewitnesses say Mosul University in the north suffered broken windows and trashed administrative areas, whereas Basra University is mostly gutted. Nasiriya University in the south was bombed because it had antiaircraft guns on campus, says psychology professor Fadhil Kzar.

Although construction crews can repair the physical damage, Iraq’s battered campuses have other needs that will be harder to fill. Importing science textbooks and a vast array of scientific equipment was illegal under U.N. sanctions imposed after the first Gulf War, and contact with the outside world was discouraged and often punished by the Saddam regime. Many of the country’s scientific and technical elite fled abroad. Al-Rowi estimates that 1400 of 5400 people holding scientific and technical doctoral degrees emigrated between 1991 and 1998. At Al-Nahrain’s engineering college, for example, Kadhmu says that 18 of 45 professors left. This flight had a profound effect on the quality of education throughout the country; Iraqi students and faculty members talked privately of a system driven by bribes and party loyalty rather than educational standards.

U.S. officials are promising a clean sweep to put the universities on firmer footing. Andrew Erdmann, the U.S. Department of State official in charge of higher education and science in Iraq, warned Baghdad University faculty members last month that academics associated with human-rights violations and weapons of mass destruction research would be purged and that high-ranking Baath Party members would not be allowed to hold the top tier of academic positions. Curda says party members not involved in nefarious activities can apply for an exemption, and many have done so. “Our goal is to bring back as many experienced administrators as we can,” he says, once they pass the necessary background checks.

Many Iraqis say party membership was essential for climbing the academic ladder. “Most university professors and staff are members of the Baath Party,” says Mohammad Al-Awsi, Al-Nahrain’s recently fired engineering dean and a party member since 1968. Even non-Baathists worry that the policy will undermine Iraq’s already fragile technical and scientific foundation. “This will exclude good people,” says Abbas Abdul-Kader, president of the Iraqi Commission for Computers and Informatics and a non-Baathist.

For the moment, university administrators say their priorities are security, reliable electricity, and operating funds. U.S. officials began paying some salaries last week, and Erdmann visited Persian Gulf states to drum up reconstruction money from wealthy emirs. The Department of State will fund a $20 million to $30 million program to establish partnerships between U.S. and Iraqi universities, according to a department memo.

Erdmann calls the overall reintegration effort “a huge challenge.” But Curda says many university officials appear to welcome the U.S. presence: “They are excited to be free to travel, to contact overseas colleagues again, and to have basic academic freedom.” Adds Al-Awsi, who studied engineering at the University of Sheffield, U.K.: “We’re not against the United States. We’re trying to create good universities and set high standards for our students.” All sides agree that this goal won’t be achieved without large doses of outside help and domestic tranquility.