

The Ghent Charter in Defense of Iraqi Academia

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, has noted that Iraq is the world's best-known conflict but the least well-known humanitarian crisis. The humanitarian community has only belatedly begun to acknowledge the extent of the greatest conflict induced displacement in the history of the Middle East. According to 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.¹ A 2006 study published in the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* estimated 654,965 excess deaths in the four years following the U.S.-led invasion of 2003.² The prestigious British polling agency ORB estimated 1.2 million deaths in September 2007.³ The October 2010 estimate of Just Foreign Policy stands at + 1.4 million excess deaths.⁴

A little known aspect of the tragedy is the systematic liquidation of Iraq's academics. Under 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.⁵

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 killed⁶, while *The Guardian* stated that the figure stood at 500 from Baghdad and Basra universities alone.⁷ By October 2010 there were 449 cases recorded on the *BRussells* Tribunal database.⁸ 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%.⁹ 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, the U.N. said.¹⁰ Most are fleeing systematic persecution and have no desire to return.

¹ <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/Iraq/full.pdf> Refugee Studies Centre, Department of International Development, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford

² <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=ROB20070922&articleId=6848>

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-naiman/uk-poll-consistent-with-1_b_64475.html

⁴ <http://www.justforeignpolicy.org/iraq>

⁵ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/879/focus.htm>

⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/iraqs-universities-are-in-meltdown-427316.html>

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/dec/12/internationaleducationnews.highereducation>

⁸ <http://www.brusselstribunal.org/academicsList.htm>. The Spanish organisation CEOSI also compiled a list, in cooperation with the *BRussells* Tribunal, albeit with slightly different parameters:

http://www.iraqsolidaridad.org/2010/docs/Aca_12_10_2010.pdf

⁹ <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/AMMF-727BUF?OpenDocument&rc=3&emid=ACOS-635P5D>

¹⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1072793.html>

The director of the United Nations University International Leadership Institute published a report¹¹ on 27 April 2005 detailing that since the start of the war of 2003 some 84% of Iraq's higher education institutions have been burnt, looted or destroyed.¹² Between March 2003 and October 2008, 31,598 violent attacks against educational institutions were reported in Iraq, according to the Iraqi Ministry of Education (MoE).¹³ Since 2007 bombings at Al Mustansiriya University in Baghdad have killed or maimed more than 335 students and staff members, according to the Unesco report Education under Attack 2010. A 12-foot-high blast wall has been built around the campus.¹⁴ To this date, there has been no systematic investigation of this phenomenon by the occupation authorities. Not a single arrest has been reported in regard to this ongoing terrorization of the intellectuals.

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.¹⁵ 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%.¹⁶ Corruption is rampant. The Iraqi Interior Ministry has admitted that more than 9000 civil servants¹⁷, including high ranking staff in the prime minister's office¹⁸, have provided purchased fake university degrees.¹⁹ Meanwhile, money assigned to the education sector has been diverted to "security".²⁰

Taking into consideration these facts, the undersigned:

1. Request that an independent international investigation be launched immediately to probe these extrajudicial killings. This investigation should also examine the issue of responsibility to clearly identify who is accountable for this state of affairs. We appeal to the Special Rapporteur on summary executions at UNHCHR in Geneva.
2. Appeal to organizations that work to enforce or defend international humanitarian law to put these crimes on the agenda.
3. Call upon academics and students to help end the silence that surrounds ongoing crimes against Iraqi academics and the destruction of Iraq's educational infrastructure, and to support Iraqi academics' and students' right and aspiration to live in an independent, democratic Iraq, free of foreign occupation and hegemony.
4. Ask that European governments grant asylum to Iraqi scholars and not deport them in contravention of UNHCR guidelines for the handling of Iraqi asylum applications.

¹¹ http://www.la.unu.edu/about_staff_reddy.asp

¹² <http://www.unu.edu/news/ili/Iraq.doc>

¹³ <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b7aa9df5.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.ohio.edu/outlook/2009-10/March/Iraq-professor-409.cfm>

¹⁵ <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=21108>

¹⁶ <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/JDUN-89R9BY?OpenDocument>

¹⁷ http://www.daralhayat.com/arab_news/levant_news/11-2007/Item-20071122-68f19a07-c0a8-10ed-00c1-a41eec2a71b9/story.html (in Arabic)

¹⁸ http://www.thirdpower.org/show_art_main.cfm?id=13469 (in Arabic)

¹⁹ <http://www.iraqsnuclearmirage.com/articles/The%20Iraqi%20Brain%20Suction.html>

²⁰ http://dpc.senate.gov/dpcdoc.cfm?doc_name=fs-110-2-173

5. Insist that the Iraqi academic community in exile be given the opportunity to return voluntarily to their jobs, by providing guarantees for their security so they can do their work without fear or government interference.

6. Call upon academics worldwide to forge links between their universities and Iraqi educators, both in exile and in Iraq. This can take the form of Internet exchanges, direct faculty and student exchanges, joint research projects, and general support, direct (research grants, material assistance) and indirect (public campaigns to highlight the plight of Iraqi academics and students). We call to support efforts to set up and grant scholarships to Iraqi exiled lecturers. Education authorities in the Middle East and elsewhere should provide opportunities for Iraqi academics to gain experience in institutions of Higher Education abroad and offer generously scholarships to Iraqi students at undergraduate and graduate levels.

7. Urge that all measures be taken to ensure that no educator/academic is dismissed from, or denied the right to return to, jobs on the basis of gender, race or sectarian affiliation. Students of all backgrounds should similarly be guaranteed the right to pursue secondary and higher education without discrimination.

Notes:

Following the international Seminar on Iraqi academics in Madrid in April 2006, a declaration was signed by the Deans of all Spanish Universities. See [Declaration Regarding The Widespread Violence In Iraq And The Killing Of University Professors](http://www.brussellstribunal.org/pdf/CRUE.pdf), approved at the General Assembly of the Conference of Spanish University Rectors (CRUE) <http://www.brussellstribunal.org/pdf/CRUE.pdf>