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HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRAQ AFTER 2003

ONGOING CHALLENGES

Ilham Makki



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Higher Education in Iraq After 2003: Ongoing Challenges

Ilham Makki

Abstract

Almost three decades of wars, including internal and external armed conflicts, have crippled most attempts to reform the education system in Iraq. Educational institutions have been exposed to destruction and depreciation due to the economic blockade between 1990–2003. Furthermore, teachers have experienced various forms of violence, including killings, abductions and displacement, which have markedly increased since 2003.

University of Baghdad's Strategy 2018–22 listed the following most significant weak points facing higher education in Iraq:

- Lack of skill development and training in educational institutions that meet job market requirements. This is a result of the absence of strategic planning within universities and the insufficient application of a comprehensive quality system for higher education.
- The limitations on academic freedoms and the politicisation of education as a result of the sectarian apportionment – or *muhāsasa ta'ifiyya* – system and the spread of political violence, forcing academics to practice self-censorship. This has affected the scientific standards and credibility of research, especially within the Social Sciences and Humanities.
- The poor rate of spending on scientific research, estimated to be the lowest in the region.
- Lagging infrastructure inadequate for the increasing numbers of students year on year, in spite of the expansion of governmental and private universities; noting that the biggest demographic category in Iraq is youth.

- Poor governmental policies for addressing economic problems and unemployment among university graduates are likely to precipitate more violence, feeding into foundational causes for conflict and the continuation of anti-government protests.
- The ineffective role of universities in transferring knowledge conducive to innovation and creativity, and their inability to find answers and solutions to ongoing crises and conflicts facing Iraq.

Consequently, rebuilding higher educational institutions in accordance with the requirements of the changing reality and prioritising benefits to wider society – particularly youth – is an urgent priority to achieve political stability and support a sustainable peacebuilding process.

About the Author

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Recommendations to the Iraqi Government

The first step towards reforming the higher education system in Iraq is guaranteeing the independence of academic institutions from political pressure, which limits their role in economic and social development and growth. The independence of universities can be achieved through building an independent organising body for higher education, detached from the influence of political parties, factions and the bureaucratic apparatus of governmental institutions. This body would be responsible for organising and developing academic standards and infrastructure to support the education and learning process, and address the structural crisis facing academic institutions in Iraq.

Recommendations for International Entities

a. **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)**

- Developing effective mechanisms for cooperation with Iraqi universities to develop and enhance curricula and establishing modern specialisations to cater to the needs of the local market.

b. **European Union and United Kingdom**

- Building cooperation frameworks between universities and research institutions in the EU/UK and Iraq to encourage scientific research, and training researchers to adopt modern methods and strengthen critical thinking.
- Encouraging cooperation between local and international research centres and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to enhance the role of universities in facing crises, and their openness to societal issues, and establishing a strong connection to the rapidly changing environment to find appropriate solutions.

Higher Education in Iraq: Context

In 2021, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Iraq considered the country's exclusion from the global ranking of education quality a major setback for the educational system, albeit an expected outcome. Education in Iraq has been facing structural problems and challenges for decades, despite being ranked by UNESCO as the best educational system in the region at the end of the 1970s, when Iraq succeeded in expanding education both horizontally and vertically, significantly decreasing illiteracy rates (Issa and Jamil, 2010).

Wars and armed conflicts in Iraq – internal and external – are the most significant challenges faced by the education system. Firstly, the Ba'ath regime (1968–2003) directed government spending towards armament and funding military institutions, neglecting other sectors, including education. This has led to significant damage to the quality of education and a substantial shortfall in its development. For example, in 1982, the defence sector and the Ministry of Defence were allocated 3,600 million Iraqi dinars, a 52 percent increase; meanwhile, the education sector received only 540 million dinars, an increase of only 1 percent (Conflict Records Research Centre (CRRC)).

Secondly, the sanctions period from 1990 to 2003, imposed on Iraq as a result of its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, witnessed a deterioration in infrastructure and the education system. Consequently, development indicators declined, individual empowerment diminished, and access to knowledge and education opportunities contracted (Issa, Jinan, and Hazri Jamil, 2010).

After the occupation of Iraq by Coalition forces led by the United States in 2003, problems facing the educational system remained relatively unchanged from the previous wars and crises that had plagued the country. The situation has in fact worsened as armed conflicts continue and security conditions deteriorate. Between 2003 and 2005, 84 percent of academic institutions were destroyed and/or looted (Zipoli & Marchionne, 2021). The Ministry of Education reported the assassination of 154 university professors during the period from 2003 to 2006, and many schools and universities closed their doors (IRFAD Institution). In 2016, 3.2 million Iraqi children were prevented from attending school after ISIL took control of vast areas of the country in 2014 (UNICEF).

The deterioration of the education sector's infrastructure is not limited to conflict zones but extends to other provinces that have not directly experienced armed conflict. The government continued to direct resources towards the military sector (United Nations, ESCWA, 2015) and in 2017, the expenditure on armament, security, and defence reached approximately 22.6% of the budget, while education accounted for only 9.3%, and health accounted for only 3.8% (Ministry of Planning). The budget allocated to the Ministry of Higher Education in 2019 did not exceed 2.12% of the general budget, of which 97% was spent on employee salaries (Al-Eissa, 2020).

On the other hand, a UN statistical study reported that a full one-third of the Iraqi population still lives in rural areas. The growth rate of the rural population (3.2%) is actually slightly higher than that of urban areas (3.1%). Most rural areas suffer from neglect, isolation, lack of infrastructure, and weak transportation and communication networks (Al-Mada News Agency, 2013). Consequently, government and private universities continue to be concentrated in urban centres, widening the disparities between the urban and the rural, and reinforcing inequality in accessing quality education opportunities.

Iraq's higher education sector has faced challenges related to domestic political dynamics since the establishment of the University of Baghdad in 1957, which remains the cornerstone of the sector. The undermining of the higher education system began with the Ba'ath regime's control over the public sphere and state institutions, along with associated mechanisms, turning higher education institutions into platforms for promoting the regime's ideological agenda. Job retention for teachers and university professors became contingent on their affiliation with the Ba'ath Party, leading to a loss of academic independence in higher education (Temporary Coalition Authority website). The transition from Ba'ath regime control to a new political system in 2003 did not significantly alter the landscape of higher education or address structural obstacles.

The University of Baghdad's Strategy 2018–2021 summarised the points of weaknesses currently facing higher education as follows:

1. Insufficient financial resources necessary to accomplish the expected expansions and physical and non-physical developments within the next five years.
2. Several colleges and research centres require new buildings and facilities that align with required technological advancements.
3. Weak coordination between university faculties and research centres on one hand, and the job market on the other.
4. Obsolete administrative information systems and insufficient reliance on reports and statistics extracted from these systems by university administrations.
5. Limited adherence to job descriptions by employees in administrative departments of universities.
6. Limited implementation of electronic government applications at the university level.
7. Weak relationship between the university and the community.
8. Poor communication between the university and its graduates.
9. Students' lack of proficiency in English, in addition to their weakness in Arabic.
10. Failure to keep up with modern approaches and developments in teaching methods and scientific research.
11. Absence of strategic planning at faculty and department levels.
12. Weak incentive system, discouraging creativity and innovation.
13. Insufficient databases related to the needs of the job market (University of Baghdad Strategy 2018–2022).

Most of the weaknesses mentioned in the University of Baghdad's Strategy 2018–2022 reflect long-term structural problems (Zipoli & Marchionne 2021). Since 2003, successive governments have failed to reform the education sector, or restore the independence of higher education, in accordance with proper academic standards. The dominance of the Ba'athist regime was replaced by the sectarian appointment system, or *muhasasa ta'ifiyya*. Political violence has expanded such that armed groups have gained access to power and political representation. All this has led to the shrinking of academic freedom in higher education institutions across the country.

This research paper focuses on analysing some of the challenges mentioned in the University of Baghdad's Strategy, aiming to shed light on the root causes of these challenges and raise questions about the government's ability to leverage the strengths and opportunities outlined in the strategy to address those weaknesses.

Weak Coordination Between Universities and the Job Market

Numerous research studies and reports published on the website of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning – according to the Statistical Abstract of Iraq 2018, confirm that one of the main causes of youth unemployment or their difficulty in obtaining decent and stable employment, is the inadequacy of skills developed in higher education institutions or vocational training in the Ministry of Education in comparison to what is required in the labour market (Qabbani, 2019). The lack of compatibility or alignment between work and education is manifested practically in two ways: first, university graduates work in positions that require lower or higher levels of scientific knowledge and skills than what they possess; second, they work in fields unrelated to their academic specialisation. The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Labour Force survey has revealed the widespread prevalence of this mismatch and misalignment, where 129,290 young individuals were shown to be employed in positions that require lower skill levels and knowledge than they possess, constituting 9% of the total workforce (Iraq Labour Force Survey 2021, 2022).

The Labour Force Report of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning 2021 – conducted in collaboration with the ILO – pointed out the ongoing challenge of a mismatch between academic specialisation and the labour market. Additionally, it noted that more than one-third of youth in Iraq are in neither education, training, nor employment, where females comprise the majority, and the trend is higher in rural areas compared to urban ones. Nineveh Governorate had the highest proportion, with 75 percent of females and 35.5 percent of males, followed by Muthanna Governorate (Abdul Latif, 2022), which are also the most poverty-stricken provinces.

The number of young people entering the labour market annually exceeds the available job opportunities, increasing the rate of unemployment. The General Federation of Workers' Unions in Iraq confirmed that the unemployed number 6 million, most of whom are university graduates and holders of post-graduate degrees (Middle East Monitor, 2022). According to the ILO, the labour force participation rate in Iraq is among the lowest in the

world, estimated at 49% in the federal government and 40% in the Kurdistan Region (ILO, 2022). The youth unemployment rate is 35.8% (ILO, 2021), which is particularly impactful considering youth constitute the largest population group. This leads to an increased likelihood of their continued poverty and marginalisation, which in turn fuel feelings of inequality and the absence of social justice, inevitably leading to conflict and violence.

In a February 2022 study on the economic and social challenges facing youth, 73 percent of respondents with a bachelor's degree complained of poor planning in preparing graduates with specialisations to align with future labour market needs. Furthermore, most graduates lack the ability to cope with the ongoing changes in employment opportunities, particularly in the era of automation and rapid technological advancements associated with the field of information and communication technology. One graduate stated, 'I graduated from the Faculty of Education, majoring in History. I studied the same curriculum and vocabulary that I studied in the fifth grade. Why don't we open up to new curricula? Why don't we introduce new departments, such as a department of Peacebuilding, for example?' (Report on Economic and Social Challenges of Youth, 2022).

Lagging behind on Teaching and Research Methods

Bureaucratic hurdles within the ministry's infrastructure are major drawbacks, hindering outlining job descriptions that match modern educational programs to align with professions and positions needed by the labour market, and also obstructing curriculum change and development (Al-Eissa, 2020). One of the main problems in the higher education sector is that most university graduates acquire theoretical knowledge disconnected from practice, where curricula do not align with the needs of the local or global labour market, and teaching methods employed have become outdated. The predominant approach focuses primarily on memorisation and recitation, emphasising theoretical information. Meanwhile, students often lack analytical skills, as well as creativity, innovation and critical thinking. This leads them to pursue studies solely for the purpose of obtaining a degree.

The absence of strategic planning based on the actual needs of the job market has resulted in multiple programmes and fields of study sharing similar content despite having different titles.

Another problem is that practical training is often scarce in many universities and vocational colleges, where students require hands-on experience in order to qualify for the job market. One young woman provided an example (Report on Economic and Social Challenges Faced by Youth, 2022):

I graduated from Veterinary Medicine after studying for five years at the university. However, I only performed one surgical operation throughout the degree. Currently, I lack any practical skills in my profession, and it's the biggest crime, I'm a veterinarian who doesn't know how to perform a surgical operation!

As a result of insufficient training to prepare students for the job market, university graduates face numerous obstacles when attempting to find employment opportunities in the private sector. These obstacles stem from their lack of practical work experience or vocational skills, which employers expect to have been a component of their academic training, and are essential for the job they are seeking. Some graduates have resorted to enhancing their capabilities either by acquiring practical work experience and skills relevant to their academic field through self-initiative, such as participating in (online) developmental courses or through specialised centres offering English language courses and computer skills. This means delaying their entry into the job market or taking jobs that are unrelated to their academic specialisation, leading them to question the value of their university education.

It is now common for student to target academic disciplines that provide ‘centralised appointment’ in the government sector after graduation. It is also common among graduates who seek employment in the (inflated) government sector that does not require any prior skills or professional experience, only their university graduation certificate.

Absence of Strategic Planning in Establishing Public and Private Colleges and Departments

Before 2003, the Ministry of Higher Education adopted the ‘Centralised Admission System’ to provide university education opportunities for all qualified students. This system continued even after 2003, despite its outdated procedures and lack of alignment with regional and global educational system advancements. Consequently, the Higher Education Strategy 2018–22 emphasised ‘the need for colleges and research centres to establish new buildings and facilities that match technological advancements’. By 2018, there were 35 public universities, all of them grappling with the rising demand from increasing numbers of graduates from secondary schools. This rise in numbers will only persist as the percentage of graduates from primary education from the academic year 1980–1 to the academic year 2016–17 increased by 606.4 percent (Al-Eissa, 2020). This sharp increase has not been followed by a sufficient increase in the number of public universities and colleges. This reality is only exacerbated by universities’ deteriorating infrastructure, as well as the lack of laboratories, classrooms and student clubs, and limited indoor and outdoor spaces allocated to each student.

The National Strategy for Higher Education in the Central and Regional Areas 2012–16 affirmed that the outputs of the Ministry of Education face two challenges: firstly the amount of graduates from preparatory schools, who exceed the capacity of existing universities and colleges, and secondly with regards to specialisation, where 60 percent of students show a preference for enrolling in scientific fields (such as biology and applied sciences) over literary disciplines, with student numbers reaching 98,270 in the former, compared to 39,007 in literary and humanities specialties for the academic year 2021–2 (Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2021). This results from their

desire to choose majors that may provide employment through the 'Central Appointment' system (Iraqi Student Platform), further exacerbating the pressure on universities specialising in scientific fields, especially medical and engineering faculties. Meanwhile, humanities specialisations continue to expand in an uncalculated manner, despite the difficulties faced by graduates in finding job opportunities in 'stagnant' or 'disappearing' specialties (Khayri et al., 2022).

There is a further issue in that regard, namely the inconsistent instructions issued by the Ministry of Higher Education that rapidly change on account of political interference. For example, during the admission process for postgraduate studies, sudden instructions are issued to increase available seats, referred to as 'First Expansion', 'Second Expansion' and even 'Third Expansion', to fill the seats with 'the top performers among the unsuccessful candidates'. These instructions are usually issued due to the desire of a political official to obtain a higher degree, which in turn qualifies them for a higher government position (Interview, University Professor, December 2022).

The Ministry of Higher Education took several measures to accommodate the increasing number of graduates from the preparatory stage. However, these measures fall short of addressing the root problem, which requires the construction of new buildings or the development of existing university structures in line with international standards to accommodate the growing number of preparatory school graduates in a proper and organised manner. This should be a core priority, considering that Iraq is experiencing what is known as a 'demographic surge', where the youth population is the largest segment. In 2018, the number of children under the age of 15 exceeded 15 million (Iraqi Ministry of Planning, 2018). One of the measures taken to address the increasing number of prospective students is introducing after-hours study programmes within the same universities and distributing the students into morning and evening shifts. In addition, laws and regulations from the Ministry of Higher Education were adjusted to grant evening students the same certificates and privileges as morning students while imposing varying tuition fees based on majors. This became another source of funding for universities since public universities primarily rely upon the national budget. After 2014 and the fall of large parts of Iraq territory to terrorist groups like ISIS, the budget for higher education was significantly reduced, reaching 2.12% of the 2019 budget, with 97% of it allocated to salaries for ministry employees. On the other hand, spending levels on scientific, service, and development activities did not exceed 0.05% of the total budgets (Al-Eissa, 2020).

The Ministry of Higher Education has specified that a morning shift should be six hours and an evening shift five hours, ending at 8:00pm. However, adherence to the evening schedule is very rare, especially considering the unstable security situation. Therefore shifts rarely exceed three hours, especially the evening (Shafaq News Agency, 2020). The education and learning process within the university environment has declined, and the focus has shifted to delivering lectures at specific times. As a result, students in both shifts lack opportunities to participate in research and scientific activities to enhance their intellectual and knowledge skills that ought to be fostered by an academic university atmosphere. It also reduces social and cultural activities available to students (Interview, University Professor, December 2022).

The second measure that students have adopted as a solution to their challenges in obtaining a university degree is to enrol in private universities and colleges, which have become widespread in recent years, and which accommodate approximately 30 percent of the total number of graduates from preparatory schools. These private universities primarily focus on dentistry, engineering and pharmaceutical specialisations, as these fields generate the most revenue. The number of private universities and colleges increased after 2003, and the number of students enrolled in private higher education ranges from 18% to 20% of the total number of students applying for university education. As of 2018, out of 21 private colleges, 16 were owned by influential political parties, serving as both a front for them and a source of funding (Youssef, 2019).

In general, private universities face numerous challenges. Law No. 25 (2016) on Private Higher Education aims to encourage the establishment of private universities for the purpose of ‘providing primary and higher (theoretical and applied) educational opportunities to contribute to quantitative and qualitative changes in the scientific, cultural, and educational movement in Iraqi society... and conducting scientific research, encouraging it, and developing the scientific curriculum...’ (Law on Private Higher Education). Nevertheless, private universities in Iraq are considered the ‘weakest link’ in higher education. Most of them lack suitable buildings, to the extent that some colleges are located in ‘a rented house’. Classrooms suffer from overcrowding, and the academic curricula are condensed to the point of losing the scientific content of the subject being studied. In many cases, the teaching cadre’s specialisation does not match the subject they are teaching to the students. Private colleges primarily serve government employees, especially individuals in positions of power and influence, such as officers in government institutions and politicians. They act as a tool for them to obtain academic degrees without the need to attend classes or even take exams (Al-Rubai, 2014).

The role, effectiveness, and quality of these universities have not been clearly demonstrated. The high number of graduates, especially in medical specialties, exceeds the current needs of society, posing a significant challenge for the Iraqi government to provide ‘central appointments’ to those graduates. The government’s failure to do so has forced tens of graduates to participate in demonstrations demanding employment. Currently, many graduates of medical specialties from private universities must wait for many years before securing a job in government institutions, which was their primary goal for choosing this specific degree. This increases the risk of them joining the thousands of unemployed youths with other qualifications (Al-Ani, 2022).

Higher Education in the Context of Centralisation and Sectarian Polarisation

Officially, most universities in Iraq are managed by presidents and deans who are chosen based on sectarian quotas – *the muhasasa ta'ifiyya* system. This means that decision-making roles within the Ministry of Higher Education and universities are distributed among individuals who are loyal to the ruling parties, while competent and experienced independent individuals are excluded. Iraq's experience with decentralisation is relatively recent and was a result of the change in the political system after 2003, following the fall of the dictatorial Ba'athist regime. The new Iraqi Constitution of 2005 aimed to define the dimensions of decentralisation and prevent the concentration of power in the state administration. Article 116 of the Constitution states that 'the federal system in Iraq consists of a capital, regions, decentralised provinces, and local administration'. It also outlined in detail the powers granted to the central government, regions, and provinces. However, despite these constitutional provisions, the government's policies towards decentralisation have been undermined by structural flaws caused by the previous regime's strong centralisation of operations in state institutions. The process of restructuring institutions after 2003 sustained a political inclination towards centralisation. This was driven by the ruling political blocs and parties, who sought to consolidate their power, protect their patronage networks and alliances with supportive groups. Consequently, all leadership positions in government institutions are subject to the control of the top political powers. Here, the centralisation of power and the monopolisation of authority intersect with sectarian polarisation, which has been a defining feature of Iraq's political system since 2003. The *muhasasa ta'ifiyya* system applies to all ministries in the government. Under this system, the Ministry of Higher Education is allocated to the Shi'as, while the Ministry of Education is allocated to the Sunnis.

Naturally, the sectarian polarisation has spread to and among student groups, where universities in regions with ethnic, religious or sectarian diversity are characterised by a tense and charged atmosphere. Each student group tries to impose its sectarian or political orientations on the public space within their universities. The control of Shi'a parties over the Ministry of Higher Education has turned universities into platforms that exclusively express the Shi'a religious identity, excluding other sects and religions. For example, during the period of *'Ashura*, which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, universities are adorned in black. Students – with support from external entities – hang banners carrying sectarian religious symbols in rooms and hallways of universities as well as hold mourning rituals on the university campus, disrupting classes. Any attempt by professors or deans to prevent these proceedings is met with rejection and condemnation, sometimes to the extent of violence. Such is the case of Dr Abdul-Sami al-Janabi, a Sunni professor who attempted to remove the banners placed inside Al-Mustansiriya University by a group of students supported by Shi'a political parties. He faced threats and was eventually assassinated, stabbed with knives by unknown entities and thrown onto the roadside (Middle East News Agency, 2004).

After ISIS seized control of Nineveh Province in 2014, the Ministry of Higher Education was compelled to establish the University of Hammam al-Alil due to the acts of violence (killings, abductions, and explosive devices) specifically targeting Christian and Yazidi students residing in the Nineveh Plains and studying at the University of Mosul. However, the attempt to segregate students based on their Christian and Yazidi religious affiliations did not help mitigating hate speech against minorities on campus, as sectarian polarisation continues to dominate the university's structure (Interview, university professor, December 2022).

Contrary to the system followed in many developed countries, which grant significant autonomy to educational institutions with external supervision and monitoring, Iraqi universities are directly and fully subject to centralised administrative and financial oversight by the Ministry of Higher Education. They do not have the authority to expand and establish colleges, appoint administrators and professors, or determine the number of admitted students – thus have no control over their enrolment capacity – due to centralised admission. They are also not allowed to formulate their educational policies independently or enter into memoranda of understanding with other universities without the ministry's approval. The continued adherence of the Ministry of Higher Education to centralising university administration is attributed to various factors, including existing laws and regulations dating back to the Ba'ath regime. These laws and regulations are based on the principle of centralisation, and most of them cannot be repealed due to the lack of political will, as their repeal would mean the loss of interests and privileges of the ruling political class. Achieving decentralisation in universities is challenging in the context of a rentier economy, as 97 percent of the Iraqi state's revenues comes from the sale of crude oil. Consequently, the budget items – government expenditure – are determined without clear economic or financial policies, with a focus on operational aspects (salaries, government expenses) rather than investment. Therefore, universities relying on the Ministry of Higher Education for funding find themselves in a precarious position to demand decentralisation, allowing decision-makers in the ministry to maintain control and influence. The reality remains, that without finding alternative sources of funding for universities, it is not possible to discuss delegating authority or ensuring independence.

The other factor contributing to centralisation and the monopoly of power in ministries, including the Ministry of Higher Education, is the weakness of government judicial institutions and the absence of mechanisms for holding central authorities accountable. This is accompanied by a widespread phenomenon of impunity, as political elites dominate the state's machinery, control and monopolise resources, and wield political power. Therefore, transitioning to decentralisation requires effective accountability mechanisms and independent institutions to enforce laws and delegate authority to other parties in society, which successive governments have failed to achieve. As a result, Iraqi universities, like other government institutions, are subject to almost complete control and dominance by political parties and their security and economic networks. These parties provide administrative positions to their followers and allocate financial resources to sustain their political presence.

Elevating Scientific Research: Failed Attempts

‘Academia is dead, early retirement is the solution.’ (Interview, Baghdad, December 2022)

This is how a professor in one of the humanities colleges at the University of Baghdad answered when asked about the main challenges he faces in his work as a teacher. Despair and frustration overshadowed all the answers, highlighting the unseen aspects of the academic reality within universities. In his opinion, political intervention and excessive centralisation have corrupted the academic field and contributed to the deterioration of scientific research, much diminishing its role. This has led to many Iraqi research centres being managed by traditional political figures who are unaware of the extent of global progress in scientific research, keeping them disconnected from advancements in technology; unconcerned with the importance of scientific research as a fundamental necessity for studying societal problems, finding solutions, developing programmes and formulating appropriate policies.

University professors and researchers face significant pressures that force them to avoid criticism or naming individuals or entities responsible for certain events or problems afflicting society. This was evident in the case of researcher Hisham al-Hashimi, who was assassinated in July 2020 by individuals belonging to an armed group. He had published a report describing the hierarchical structure of one of the armed groups within the Popular Mobilisation Forces. Many universities and research institutions, especially those specialising in humanities and social sciences, have marginalised researchers who attempt to conduct critical research on the policies of ruling parties and their failures in managing the state. Numerous academic researchers received death threats when they dared conduct research projects that touch upon sensitive issues and provide accurate insights into the roots of the economic, social and security problems faced by Iraqi society, as well as issues of administrative and financial corruption that plague state institutions and the entities responsible (Interview, Baghdad, December 2022).

The challenges of scientific research are not limited to insufficient funding, which is comparatively minimal compared to other countries in the region. Universities are not research institutions, but rather passive teaching institutions that lack productive intellectual dynamic and knowledge. There is also a disconnect between the entities concerned with social problems, whether governmental or private sector, and universities. Rarely are the recommendations of research studies taken into account, or joint programmes and plans developed to address and prevent recurring issues. Most of the registered research studies in the Ministry of Higher Education database are the outcome of postgraduate studies conducted in government and private universities. This means that they are funded by the students themselves with limited financial resources, and with the goal of obtaining a degree rather than for scientific research or innovation.

The increase in published research is attributed to the academic promotion system, which requires applicants to publish a certain number of studies in local or international research journals. Many applicants have resorted to publishing stolen or fabricated research by

employing fraudulent methods such as altering paragraph formulations and ideas to minimise plagiarism claims (Interview, University Professor, December 2022). Agencies have emerged that write graduation, master's, and doctoral research papers for a specified fee. The ministry's measures to impose plagiarism checks on research submitted for promotion have not succeeded in countering this phenomenon. When attempting to calculate the number of published research papers, there is a noticeable and significant increase, accompanied by a significant decrease in citation of research published in local research journals, from 11.20 to 0.56, far below the standard for international rankings. This confirms that Iraqi research is of poor quality and does not attract the interest of researchers outside Iraq (al-Rubai, 2021).

The quality and effectiveness of scientific research are also influenced by researchers' access to information. Most universities do not rely on modern technologies for data storage and research, as they have not witnessed any reform or development processes. Furthermore, researchers are often prevented from accessing information deemed sensitive by the government for security reasons. In general, the bureaucratic system and the lack of objectivity, measurement tools, and evaluation methods in research institutions and universities has contributed to the decline of scientific research.

Unemployed University Graduates Spark October 2019 Protests

The participation of young university graduates in the 2019 protests confirms the weaknesses discussed in the Higher Education Strategy 2018–22. One of the most significant weaknesses is the lack of comprehensive quality implementation across all levels of higher education. Postgraduate and undergraduate study plans are not subjected to feasibility studies, nor are they aligned with the requirements of the labour market.

The spark that ignited the October protests was a peaceful demonstration in Baghdad by unemployed holders of higher degrees in late September 2019. According to the Central Statistical Organisation, the number of graduates from bachelor programmes in government universities in 2019 was 148,401 (Ministry of Planning, Directorate of Social and Educational Statistics). They faced significant difficulties in finding job opportunities that align with their scientific specialisations, and thousands of them join the ranks of the unemployed every year. The protesting students were subjected to direct violence, including beatings and humiliation, as the police and riot forces used excessive force by spraying hot water on protesters to forcibly disperse them. One of the most alarming scenes widely shared on media channels and social media platforms depicted female protesters knocked to the ground, their clothes forcibly removed by the water pressure (NRT, 2019). This repressive reaction by the authorities fuelled anger among other segments of the uneducated youth who, in addition to poor security conditions, suffered from poverty, marginalisation and unemployment. These protests resumed with even greater momentum three days later. The demands this time called for a radical change

in the political system, advocating for a unified national identity – ‘We Want a Homeland’ – that transcended all forms of political sectarianism and unequivocally rejected political corruption. Contrary to the expectations of the political system, which used all kinds of force (live ammunition, tear gas, detention, curfews and internet shutdowns) to suppress the protests and prevent protesters from reaching the squares, it failed to deter them from standing up against the authorities. Instead, the protests spread to other provinces in the central and southern regions as well. The relative calm was only restored with the announcement of the resignation of the Adel Abdul-Mahdi government¹ (DW News Agency, 2019).

The current political system continues its efforts to contain and silence the youth, especially graduates, by occasionally providing them with employment opportunities in the public sector. However, the protests of unemployed graduate youth returned after Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani announced the Cabinet’s decision to appoint contract workers in the Ministry of Electricity on 22 November 2022 (Government of Iraq website, November 2022). Although the announcement was presented as an achievement of the new government and a response to the demands of the ‘October youth movement’, it sparked anger among unemployed graduates and those working on contracts in other ministries such as the Ministry of Education. They also demanded opportunities for ‘appointment’ in the government sector.

The approach taken by al-Sudani and his government towards the issue of unemployed graduates highlights the problematic economic policies adopted by successive political regimes, both before and after 2003. These policies involve the state monopolising oil revenues, allowing the regime to control the economy and society. The dominance of the public sector, which still accounts for 60 percent of Iraq’s output (Ministry of Planning, 2019), and the neglect of the private sector and other productive sectors (Iraqi Government, White Paper, 2020) has resulted in a fragile economy under the authority of influential political groups that monopolise control over revenue decisions. This has led to despotism and political dominance to maintain their privileges, hindering any democratic transition and societal development. Moreover, it perpetuates marginalisation and exclusion of large segments of society, depriving them of participation in political decision-making and reducing them to subjects, a status the October Youth reject (Yasser, 2013). The protesting youth considered these ‘patchwork’ measures to be addressing the problem without providing a fundamental and sustainable solution to unemployment. This may presage future developments that could threaten the current fragile political stability of the state. The grievances and common demands of the youth united all different groups among them (educated and non-educated) to stand against the political elite responsible for the rampant corruption, weak state institutions, and societal collapse (Government of Iraq website, November 2022).

¹ ‘Adel Abdul-Mahdi’s resignation... Constitutional and popular controversy and speculations about his successor’, *Al Hadath Youtube Channel*, 30 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTAhTjC2IuU> (accessed 14 January 2023).

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Cover Image

University of Baghdad graduates throw their caps in the air while posing for a group photo next to the 'save Iraqi culture' monument, Baghdad, Iraq, 27 March 2019.

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