

How the US-NATO Alliance has “Killed” Education in Iraq

Report on a Conference held at Ghent University

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THE MURDER OF THE IRAQI EDUCATION

(Bert De Belder, coordinator of Intal and Medical Aid For the Third World)



From March 9 to 11 a prestigious international seminar on education in Iraq in time of war and occupation took place in Ghent University. Organised by the BRussels Tribunal and the Research Center for the Middle East and North Africa from the Ghent University (MENARG), this initiative brought together up to 200 Iraqi and international experts on education and culture, and activists from all over the world.

Prof. Sami Zemni of Ghent University outlined at the opening session a very bleak picture of education in Iraq. A recent UNESCO report states that five of the 30 million Iraqis today are illiterate – even though the country in 1982 from the same UNESCO had received a prize for eradicating illiteracy! 40% of Iraqi children leave school at an early age because of the war: they must work to increase family income, or they are displaced with their families, or it's not safe for them to go to school. More than 400 academics have been murdered in a systematic campaign.

U.S. officials like Paul Wolfowitz (Deputy Defense Secretary) called this unashamedly a policy of “state ending”, the blunt destruction of each state they target. This policy also resulted into a lamentable state of public services: electricity, sewerage, water supply. Health care is a catastrophe. Prof. Saad Naji Jawad (Baghdad University) gave the audience some staggering figures. In a recently released report from the Iraqi Health Ministry it is said that since the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 between 8000 and 9000 doctors have fled the country. More than 2000 doctors have been murdered.

A forgotten scandal

Hans von Sponeck was appointed in October 1998 as United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq, at that time suffering heavily under Western imposed sanctions. In protest, he resigned in February 2000, and since then he has been very active as an author, speaker, professor and activist against the occupation of Iraq. Hans von Sponeck called the situation in Iraq a “forgotten international scandal”, and stressed that “all elements of

international law as it has developed over 150 years, have been violated.” Eight years of war and destruction have turned Iraq into “the largest garbage belt in the world” with masses of destroyed ordnance, unexploded ordnance and mine fields. And the country seems to have also thrown the education of its people in the dustbin. Von Sponeck cited an Oxfam report: “92% of Iraqi children are suffering from learning difficulties.”

The former UN chief blamed the United States and Britain for this disastrous situation, but underlined that we all have a responsibility not to forget Iraq. Also Saad Naji Sawad emphasized to move beyond criticism, and to suggest also solutions and take action.

And that is exactly what the BRussells Tribunal is doing for many years with brio. In this case defending the Iraqi education with a Ghent Charter in defence of Iraqi academia, immediately signed by the rectors of five Belgian universities, and a string of national and international personalities.

An Arab revolt, also in occupied Iraq

Like Cairo (Egypt) also Baghdad has its Tahrir Square. On Friday, March 4, 10.000 to 12.000 people protested in the streets against corruption and repression of the Al Maliki government. Yahya Al-Kubaisa is a young Iraqi professor in Amman (Jordan), but he follows events in his country closely. He tells me that the popular uprising in Iraq is unique, “the most important qualitative change in Iraq since 2003”. And like a real professor, he systematically identifies the reasons for it:

“1. It is the first time that the younger Iraqi generations are on the streets.

2. The movement is nationwide. The whole country expresses the same demands, aimed against the national government. That goes against the sectarian image and efforts in trying to dividing Iraq along sectarian lines.

3. Protests take place throughout Iraq, in 16 of the 18 Governorate (provinces, ed).

And 4. Actually it's the first time since the '60s that you can speak of spontaneous and peaceful civilian demonstrations.”

I ask about the demands of the demonstrators, and they appear to be strikingly parallel to that in Tunisia or Egypt. Yahya Al Kubaisi: “I would rank the demands in four categories. There are slogans for better public services (water, electricity, health care). The demonstrators are also carrying slogans against widespread corruption. People want more jobs. And finally, the protesters want more freedom and are opposed to violations of human rights. These demands are not necessarily present everywhere at the same time or location. And out of cautiousness they are not packaged as demands for the fall of the regime, but for the “reform” of the regime. “

Original *article:*
<http://www.intal.be/nl/article/de-moord-op-het-iraakse-onderwijs-internationaal-aangeklaagd-gent>, translated by Dirk Adriaenssens, member of the BRussells Tribunal executive Committee.

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