

Query response

Iraq: Primary and lower secondary education under the Ba'th regime

- Was primary and lower secondary education compulsory under the former Saddam regime (until the regime fell in 2003)?
- Was tuition provided in Arabic in the areas that are now referred to as Disputed Areas?
- Were there many who nonetheless did not complete primary and lower secondary education? If this was widespread, where (city/country) or for whom was it more common not to complete such education?
- Did dropping out of school have any consequences for the children or families concerned?

Introduction

Until 1991, Iraq was reckoned to have the best education system in the Middle East. The primary school enrolment percentage was very high for both boys and girls, and the literacy rate was higher than in other countries in the region (UNESCO 2003). However, the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) and the Kuwait War (1990–91), and the subsequent sanctions (1990–2003), had a negative effect on the education of Iraqi children. From having near-universal school coverage in the 1980s, the enrolment rate fell throughout the 1990s (UNESCO 2003).

The school system in Iraq under the Ba'th regime comprised six years of primary school, followed by three years of lower secondary and three years of upper secondary school. Children normally started school at the age of six.

Was primary and lower secondary school compulsory?

The Ba'th Party placed great emphasis on education, and one of the goals they set themselves when they came into power in 1968 was to combat illiteracy. In the 1970s, the party passed several laws to achieve this goal, including the Free Education Law (1974), which ensured free education at all levels, and the Compulsory Education Law (1978), which made six years of education compulsory for all children (Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation 2005b).

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Was tuition provided in Arabic in the areas that are now referred to as Disputed Areas?

Until 1990, all tuition throughout the country was provided in Arabic. From 1990, Kurdish became the language of tuition in the Kurdistan Region (KRI), except for religious education and Arabic language tuition, which were provided in Arabic (UNESCO 2003). There were Catholic schools in areas of Central Iraq with an Assyrian population, but they were not allowed to teach in Assyrian or Aramaic¹ (Hanna 1999). According to UNESCO (2003), however, there were schools that used Assyrian languages of instruction in areas where these languages were common. There is reason to believe that this only applied to schools in the KRI until 2003.

Were there many who did not complete primary and lower secondary school?

While nearly all children went to school in the 1970s and until the early 80s, the enrolment rate dropped as a consequence of the war against Iran in the 1980s and the war against the international coalition after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. The Kuwait War resulted in the UN imposing sanctions against Iraq in 1990. The sanctions remained in force until May 2003 and had a severe effect on Iraq's economy.²

The weakening of the economy made it difficult to provide proper schooling. Schools suffered from a lack of equipment and shortage of qualified teaching staff because many teachers either left the profession due to low wages or left the country altogether (UNESCO 2003). No new schools were built and the existing ones were not maintained. According to official Iraqi statistics, the proportion of children enrolled in primary school fell from 90.8% in 1990 to 80.3% in 2000 (IRIN 2013).

A nationwide survey of living conditions conducted in 2004 showed that more than one-third of Iraqis over the age of 15 had not completed primary school (22% had no education, while 15% had started but not completed) (Table 1). The level of education was lowest in the northern part of the country, which is controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government. Here, 31% of the population had no education, and 20% had started but not completed primary school. The proportion without education was higher in Dohuk (35%) than in Erbil (31%) and Sulaymaniya (29%).

¹ In 1972, the Iraqi government adopted an act that recognised the cultural rights of Assyrians, including the right to provide Aramaic tuition in schools where this was the mother tongue of the majority of pupils. The act was not implemented, however (Wikipedia, 2016).

² Not all the sanctions were lifted after the regime change in 2003.

Table 1. Highest level of education for persons aged 15 and over, by region (%)

Region	No education	Not completed primary school	Completed primary school	Lower secondary school	Upper secondary school	Higher education
Southern Iraq	24	15	30	12	8	10
Baghdad	13	12	27	18	13	16
Central Iraq	22	16	31	13	8	9
Northern Iraq	31	20	26	11	6	7
Total	22	15	29	14	9	11

Source: Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, 2005a

There were major gender and age differences in the level of education. The level of education was far lower among women and older people than among men and younger age groups. While 31% of women had no education in 2004, the proportion among men was 13%. In addition, household income and parents' level of education impacted on children's schooling.

The problems in the school sector in the 1990s and 2000s led to a decline in the literacy rate among young people. While the literacy rate was 71% in the 15–24 age group, it was 75% in the 25–34 age group (Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation 2005a, p. 82). Dohuk had the lowest literacy rate, at only 45% among those aged 15 and older, while Baghdad had the highest rate at 78%.

Did dropping out of school have consequences for the children or families concerned?

Although school was compulsory, families were not punished if their children dropped out. Poverty and lack of interest in school were important reasons why boys dropped out, while girls, especially in rural areas, were kept at home because the school was far away (Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation 2005b). Although this is based on a study conducted in 2004, after the Ba'th regime fell, there is reason to believe that the same causal factors applied in the 1990s as well. It is possible that education was more strictly followed up in the 1970s and early 1980s, before the war against Iran started to drain the country's resources. We have found no concrete information to support this, however.

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