



## **TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN IRAQI STATE SCHOOLS AND THE STATUS OF MINORITIES IN IRAQ: A CRITICAL REVIEW**

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This paper maintains that Iraq's identity is at least partly determined by the multiplicity of its religions and sects. Also, the paper proposes that this multiplicity can be a source of socio-cultural richness and a potential engine for its socio-political unity if religious minorities can maintain their unique communal identities within a tolerant integrated political system.

However, current conditions reveal a situation whereby minority religious groups are induced to be aware of their minority status by the laws of the land, including the constitution, despite official claims of tolerance towards these minorities. The standing policy of the state mandates that Islam is the official and the only religion that can (and must) be taught and the grades students get in Islamic Education subject are considered an asset for Muslim students in public schools with some exception in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Minority students are free not to attend religion classes. Their churches and temples are places where they can be (freely!) taught to the young, but without any public obligation or support involved in the process of doing so. Hence, minority children are made (by law) to feel not only different but virtually discriminated against.

This paper demonstrably suggests that such outcome is bound to leave serious fissures in the fabric of society and make the lack of socio-religious integrity a major impediment of national unity and political of the state. Minorities, therefore, can possibly be functionally reduced to second class citizens in a supposedly democratizing state.

This paper will end by proposing reforms to the educational system whereby minority students, and therefore, minority communities, will develop attitudes and nurture values that are in the spirit of equality, justice, and human rights as such. Such reforms will be in the essence of democratic governance without infringing on the civil and/or political rights of the citizenry as a whole. Indeed, such reforms will enhance unity in society and the state. Such will be the salvation of a system that is destined to remain seriously lacking without solving the problem of religious minorities in Iraq.

### **Introduction**

One of the elements that assert the identity of the Iraqi religious minorities is their religions which can be considered as a functional factor that helps unify the nation. Iraq is a country of multiple religions, sects and nationalities and this multi-cultural quality reality can be seen as a virtue for Iraqis for ages and it is an important part of the national identity of all the Iraqis. Religiously, Iraq is composed of different religions and sects including Muslims: Shia and Sunni, Christians, Izidis, Sabeans and few Jews. Before 2003 and under Saddam's regime in particular, religious education at schools was confined to Muslims only; the other religious minorities and sects did not receive any religious education classes as a subject taught at school. After 2003

there were some reforms made by the ministry of Education to include religious education to Christians and Izidis in those areas where these minorities constitute the majority of population but this subject is not considered as a credit for those minority students in the national final examination results at all stages as compared to their peer Muslim students. However, some minorities give their members religious education at their places of worship; churches and temples as well. This paper calls for the right of the minorities to have their own religious education at all Iraqi schools similar to those given to their peers of Muslim students.

This paper attempts to give a description of the religious minorities in Iraq taking into accounts their political, social and religious status before and after 2003. It also points out how the new Iraqi constitution deals with religious minorities and their rights of having religious education of their own; whether they are free in the compilation and teaching of their own textbooks based on their holy books, customs and traditions. It also tries to concisely analyze the public educational system in Iraq at the period mentioned above and the placement of religion in that system with special focus on the religious education curricula, textbooks and number of classes allotted to religious education in the school curriculum at every level of schooling (hours /classes per week). It sheds light on the goals of religious education and identifies the main themes taught through religious instructions as put by the Ministry of Education in Iraq and whether there has been a deliberate attempt by Iraqi governments and educational authorities to impose religious, national and political identity among the schoolchildren through religious education. It talks about how the non-Muslim students, who do not attend classes in religious education, look at themselves against their colleagues Muslim students who attend and take religious education lessons, as well. The paper believes that religious minorities' students have the right to have classes of religious education of their own so that they do not feel religiously inferior towards their Muslim peers. The paper concludes by calling for tolerance, acceptance, respect of human rights through the religious education curriculum, syllabi and textbooks for all the Iraqis regardless of their religious and ethnic background and realities in such a way that religious education addresses the religious plurality and diversity of the Iraqi society emphasizing the fact stated by Kung (2002:266) 'there is no peace among the nations without peace among religions.'

### **Religious Demography in Iraq**

Ethnically and linguistically the Iraqi population includes Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Armenians. The religious mix likewise is varied and consists of Shi'a and Sunni Muslims (both Arab and Kurds), Christians (including Chaldeans and Assyrians), Izidis, Sabeen Mandaeans and a small number of Jews.

While a precise statistical breakdown is impossible to ascertain because of likely inaccuracies in the latest census (conducted in 1997), according to best estimates, 97 percent of the population are Muslim. Shi'a Muslims--predominantly Arab, but also including Turkomen, Faili Kurds, and other groups--constitute a 60 to 65 percent majority. Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37 percent of the population (approximately 18 to 20 percent are Sunni Kurds, 12 to 15 percent Sunni Arabs, and the remainder Sunni Turkomen). The remaining approximately 3 percent of the overall population consist of Christians (Assyrians, Chaldeans, Roman Catholics, and Armenians), Izidis, Mandaeans, and a small number of Jews (International Religious Freedom Report, 2002).

Shi'a, although predominantly located in the south, also are a majority in Baghdad and have communities in most parts of the country. Sunnis form the majority in the center of the country and in the north.

Assyrians and Chaldeans are considered by many to be distinct ethnic groups, as well as the descendants of some of the earliest Christian communities. The communities speak a distinct language (Syriac). Christians are concentrated in the north, in Baghdad and there are several families in Basra.

Izidis are a distinct religious group. Izidism is an old and historical religion, born and developed in Mesopotamia. In terms of history and culture, it represents a synthesis of Mithraism, Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism. Izidis are a specific subset of the Kurdish people and live in parts of traditionally Kurdish areas. Izidis predominately reside in the north of the country (Ibid).

### **The Status of Minorities in Iraq**

Iraq is a country of multiple nationalities, religions and sects, and over time that reality can again be seen as a virtue, rather than as an impetus for division and violence. Currently the lack of a common national dialogue in which minorities and others have a stake in shaping in the new Iraq has had destructive consequences at the economic, social and political levels (Lumani, 2009).

Saddam Hussein and his party (the Ba'ath Party) harshly oppressed minorities in Iraq. Iraq, despite being one of the most ethnic and multi –religious countries in the Middle East these groups were forced to deny their identities under Saddam's process of Arabization. And now these ethnic groups continue to struggle against Islamic extremists, nationalists and criminal elements.

All Iraqis are suffering now but there are specificities to the case of minorities that put them at exceptional threat. It has been estimated that because of sectarianism and recent changes to Iraqi society, as many as 25–30 percent of the population are either internally or externally displaced. However, for minorities the percentage of those displaced is actually much higher. More than 80 percent of the Mandeans ( Sabeans) population has been forced to flee ; for Christians and other ethnic groups ( Izidis and Shabak ) it was nearly 60 percent in 2006 and reached more 80 percent for Christian in 2009 and beginning of 2010 (Ibid).

These minorities, which include Chaldo-Assyrians and other Christians, Sabean Mandeans, and Izidis, continue to experience targeted violence, receive inadequate official protection or justice, and suffer discrimination. Since 2003, many have fled to neighboring countries, where they represent a disproportionately high percentage of registered Iraqi refugees. Although the Iraqi government has publicly condemned violence against these groups, it continues to fall short in investigating the continuing attacks and bringing perpetrators to justice, and its efforts to increase security to minority areas are not adequate. In addition, though greatly reduced from 2006-07 levels, violence between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis continues. Significant tensions between these groups remain, including tensions due to the ongoing government formation process (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2010).

## Religion and the New Iraqi Constitution

The permanent Iraqi constitution of 2005 has taken into consideration the religious issue in Iraq as stated in the following article which is quoted from the text of the institution.

Article 2:

First: Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation:

- A. No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam
- B. No law may be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy.
- C. No law may be enacted that contradicts the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in this Constitution.

Second: This Constitution guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Izidis, and Mandeian Sabbeans.

(<http://www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/>)

Carefully reading article second above, we can see that it “guarantees “rather than “respects” the Islamic identity of the majority, first. Second, the same article gives a reference to religious groups such as Christians, Izidis and Mandeian Sabbeans as being protected by the guarantee of the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practice. Guaranteeing Islamic identity may place the state in the role of protecting Islam, which in turn may permit the criminalization of apostasy, blasphemy, and other "offenses against religion," as well as result in discrimination against non-Muslims in a variety of areas. Al-Fadhel (2008) believes that the above article does not correspond to the freedom of religion, belief and sects as stated in the international laws, documents and declarations that deal with this kind of freedom.

Virtually, article 2 also contains promising language regarding the right to freedom of religion with respect to belief and practice, and specific mention of Izidis may signal a positive development insofar as this religious group, which constitutes more than 1% of Iraq's population, is regarded by some Muslims as a religion of "devil worshippers." That said, there is still an open question as to whether the right to choose not to believe in any particular religion will be protected under this provision or whether other religions, such as the Baha'i faith, will also be able to exercise their full right to freedom of religion.

On the other hand Article 34 of the Constitution of 2005 stipulates that education is a fundamental factor for the progress of society and is a right guaranteed by the State. However, no article of the Constitution has referred to the religious education at schools and universities.

## Education and Educational System in Iraq

With the formation of modern Iraq in 1921, a formal education system was established, consisting of public and private schools. Private schools were taken over by the government through the 1970's, a time during which education became compulsory and free for all. According to UNESCO reports, Iraq, before the First Gulf War in 1991, had one of the best educational systems in the region as full enrollment in primary education was achieved (100%) (Kubba, 2007), but the 1980's and 1990's became a period of setbacks, much because of Iraq's continuous involvement in wars and conflicts. In 1988, enrollment had dropped to 85%. Much of this came from a dramatic fall in government spending on education due to the war with Iran. (ibid)

Prior to the nineteen nineties, Iraq's education system was one of the best in the Middle East and Iraq once had one of the most secular and educated societies in the Middle East. Due to system-wide neglect by the Ba'ath party over the past decade, however, schools fell into disrepair and educational materials became severely outdated.

Before 2003, only one in six children had textbooks, teachers were unpaid, physical facilities were in dire condition, shortages of supplies and equipment were widespread, and the quality of education was in serious decline.

Systematic looting and destruction of public property, combined with the conditions described above, have left many schools currently lacking plumbing wiring, lighting, desks, windows, and doors (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2010).

Education is free at all levels. Private schools were not permitted during the regime of Saddam Hussein, but since 2003 substantial reforms have been launched. The curriculum is being reformed to remove ideology of the Ba'th Party, and measures to rehabilitate the many schools were begun. But in 2005, reforms were halted from the increasingly poor security situation. There has been some growth in private institutions since the regime change, but as of yet, only few have begun operating.

Until the end of the 1990s the overall objective of education in Iraq was "to bring up an enlightened generation, believing in God, loyal to the Homeland and devoted to the Arab nation, adhering to scientific thinking as well as morality, relying on work and self-education, possessing the will to struggle and the power to confront the crucial challenges of the contemporary world. The educational system endeavors to cover the social, cultural and religious aspects of life "(UNESCO, 2011:2). After 2003, the political changes and the transition to democracy required a reform of the educational system in Iraq based on a new educational philosophy which was finalized in 2008 (Ibid). Accordingly and in compliance with the National Education Strategy, the overall objectives of education in Iraq are to foster new generations who:

- Believe in God Almighty and His Messengers;
  - Love their country and work to consolidate its national unity;
  - Are able to deal with scientific contents and methods ;
  - Are ethical and respectful of human rights, the cultural heritage and the environment;
  - Are contributing to social/community cohesion in a pro-active/ constructive way;
  - Are cultivating originality and innovation;
  - Are interested in personal development and life-long /continuous learning.
- (MOE Baghdad and Kurdistan, 2011, cited in UNESCO, 2011:3).

Presently much of the financing of education comes from the United Nations and the World Bank. The main focus is presently on primary education (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2010).

## **Literacy**

Information about literacy in Iraq varies. Some data state that in 2000, literacy rates were only 56%, 66% for men, and 46% for women. Data for 2008 show that 74% can read and write, but there is no way these two figures go together and even more so in a country that has been through a war most of these years. The totality of available information makes it impossible to assess which of these are most correct (Ibid).

The following is a brief description of the Iraqi educational system.

## **Pre-Primary Education**

Iraq had a system of voluntary kindergartens for children 4 years, lasting two years before they began normal school. Pre-school education is not compulsory. It is not clear how this system has survived the war and unrest of the 2000's.

Within the framework of the new educational philosophy finalized in 2008, the kindergarten phase aims to empower the children to develop their personality , physically , mentally , linguistically , emotionally , socially , spiritually and nationally , and facilitate the process of their gradual transition from home to the kindergarten ( UNESCO Iraq Office ,2011 cited in UNESCO ,2011:8). On the other hand, among the main objectives in the affective domain are to: implant and instill the principle of faith in God, his oneness, messengers, books, and respect of religious rites; enable the child to acquire the behavioral concepts derived from the values of Islam and the other monotheistic religions such as such as reverence to God,, honesty, altruism and faithfulness (Ibid).

In 1997/98, the enrollment rate of children in the age group 3- 5 was estimated at 6.8% (MOE, 1999 as cited in UNESCO, 2011:9). In 1999/2000, the gross enrollment ratio was estimated at 5.7%. The children –teacher ratio was 15:1. In 2001/02, about 45,000 children were attending pre-primary education or less than 7% of children aged 4-5 years.

According to UNESCO, in 2008 in the governmental sector there were 607 kindergartens at the center (Ministry of Education Baghdad) and 198 in the region (Ministry of Education Kurdistan); only 6% kindergartens in rural areas. The total enrollment was 138,190 children and the number of teachers was 7,407. The children – teacher ratio was 19:1 and the average number of children per class was 44. In terms of teachers' qualification, 85% were diploma holders and 14% were holders of a university certificate (UNISCO Iraq Office, 2011 as cited in UNESCO, 2011:9).

## **Primary Education**

Iraq has 6 years of compulsory primary education, beginning at the age of 6. In the Kurdistan Region basic education covers grades 1 to 9. The curriculum follows Western styles, which was the case even under the former regime. Religious education was and still constitutes an important part of the primary education.

According to 2008 educational philosophy, primary education aims to "enable children to develop their personalities, physically, intellectually, spiritually, ethically and socially, to grow up as good citizens believing in God and human moralities, and aware of their national message, in addition to granting them the basic knowledge tools and the grounds for the Islamic Arab culture and other cultures" (UNESCO, 2011:14). In the affective domain, the main objectives are: enhancing the pupils' faith in God and His divine messages and their feeling of need for the religious faith; inform the pupils of the pillars of Islam and faith (Ibid) among other objectives.

In the 1990's primary school system was challenged, although in general better than in the 2000's. The main problems were repetition and drop-out. For all classes combined 14% repeated a year, in the 5th year repetition rose to 23%. Another problem was low girl enrollment, 10% higher than with boys. An estimated 44% of adults were illiterate in 2000 (males, 34%; females, 54%). In 1996, 2,903,923 students attended 8,145 primary schools, with 145,455 teachers. Student-to-teacher ratio stood at 20 to 1. The pupil-teacher ratio at the primary level was 21 to 1 in 1999. In the same year, 93% of primary-school-age children were enrolled in school, while 33% of those eligible attended secondary school. There is good reason to assume that these

trends still challenge Iraqi schools, now perhaps even to a greater extent. (<http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/>)

### Weekly Lesson Timetable (2010)

**Table 1.** Subjects taught at the primary stage with time (periods) allotted to each subject per week.

Subject	1st grade	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade	5th grade	6th grade
Islamic Education	4	4	3	3	3	3
Arabic Language	9	9	8	8	5	5
English			3	3	4	4
Mathematics	6	6	6	6	5	5
Social Studies				1		
History					2	2
Geography					2	2
National and Social Ed.					1	1
Science	3	3	3	3	3	3
Physical Education	2	2	2	2	2	2
Art Education	2	2	2	2	1	1
Songs and Music	1	1				
Total/week	27	27	27	28	28	28

Source: Ministry of Education (Baghdad and Kurdistan), 2011 as cited in UNESCO, 2011:12. Each teaching period lasts 40 minutes in double-shift schools and 45 minutes in single –shift schools. The Kurdistan Region applies a different timetable.

Schools where the number of students from other nationalities (Kurds, Torkomans or Chaldo –Assyrians) constitute more than 25% of the total number of students [they] take their national language for two period lessons a week as an additional subject and the rest of the subjects have to be taught in Arabic.

Islamic education is considered a basic subject of school curricula. Christianity is taught two class periods per week in schools where the majority of students are Christians (UNESCO, 2011: 11). Nothing is mentioned about the other Iraqi religious minorities' religious lessons.

Upon completing pupils must pass a general examination which qualifies them for admission to intermediate / secondary school level.

According to UNESCO, in 2008 in the governmental sector there were 13,124 primary schools at the center and 4,494 in Kurdistan Region. A total of 9,658 schools were in rural areas and 7,960 were in urban areas. The total enrollment was about 4.4 million pupils at the center and 1.1 million in the region. There were about 257,000 teachers at the center and some 67,000 in the region. The pupil – teacher ratio was 17:1 and the average number of pupils per class was 33. In terms of teachers' qualifications, 84% were diploma holders and 16% were holders of a university certificate (UNESCO Iraq Office, 2011 as cited by UNESCO, 2011:13)

We can observe from table (1) above that minorities' students do not receive any religious education in the same way as their peer Muslim students do. They leave their classes during the Islamic education class or go back home if the class happens to be the last one in the timetable.

### Intermediate Secondary Education

In Iraq, intermediate education is not compulsory, and defined as part of secondary education, and lasts 3 years. There is gender segregation at this level, but there are no important differences in quality; there are separate schools for boys and girls.

Intermediate education , according to the new educational philosophy of 2008, aims at "enabling the pupils to accomplish the growth requirements at this phase and to continue with it at the physical , mental , emotional , spiritual and social levels, detecting their readiness , tendencies , orientations , providing them with the suitable sciences and acknowledge for their ages , and enabling them to acquire the skills and the scientific and professional orientations, in addition to raising them on the belief in God and love of the homeland" (UNISCO Iraq Office, 2011 as cited by UNISCO, 2011:13) . Upon completing this stage, students are offered the Third Form Baccalaureate or certificate of intermediate studies.

### Intermediate Education Weekly Timetable (2010)

**Table 2.** Subjects taught at the intermediate stage with time (periods) allotted to each subject per week.

Subject	1st class (grade 7)	2nd class (grade 8)	3rd class (grade 9)
Islamic Education	3	3	3
Arabic Language	5	5	5
English Language	5	5	5
National and social education	1	1	1
History	2	2	2
Geography	2	2	2
Mathematics	5	5	5
Chemistry	2	2	2
Physics	2	2	2
Biology	2	2	2
Art education	1	1	1
Physical education and sports	2	2	2
Total	32	32	32
Computer*	2	2	2
French*	6	5	5
Christianity*##	2	2	2
Assyrian (Syriac)*	2	2	2
Kurdish*##	2	2	2
Torkomanish*##	2	2	2
Izidis*##	1	1	1
Domestic for girls*	1	1	1

Source: Ministry of Education (Baghdad and Kurdistan Region), 2011. Family education is taught in girls schools for one class per week. Schools that teach foreign languages intensively (i.e. French, Spanish and Russian) plus ICT add classes for the respective subjects. Each teaching period lasts 40 minutes in double-shift schools and 45 minutes in single-shift schools. The Kurdistan Region applies a different timetable (UNESCO, 2011:16).

\* These are not credited for the final examination certificate; they are considered as additional subjects.

\*## Only in those areas where those minorities constitute the majority of the population.

The above table shows that the Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities' students receive religious education only in those areas where their minority constitutes the majority of the population. The table also shows that there are three classes a week for the Islamic religious education whereas there are two classes for Christians and one class for Izidis. There is no equal opportunities and fairness in the time allotted to each type of religious education. It is also worth mentioning that the grade of the religious education is credited only for Muslim students and added to their general grades as a 'bonus' upon obtaining the certificate which is a case that doesn't apply to non-Moslem students .

## Preparatory Secondary Education

Following intermediate education follows 3 years of preparing secondary education also called preparatory education stage or upper secondary, grades 7 to 9. Preparatory education is divided into two streams (science and arts) starting from the second year. The Preparatory education stage aims to "continue the discovery of students' capabilities and orientation , developing and expanding them culturally and to satisfy the requirements of good citizenship and gradually getting to further diversity in the fields of knowledge and training on its applications , to qualify for working life and to continue to study subsequent stages" ( UNESCO,2011:13). Upon completing this level, pupils obtain the High School (E'dadiya) certificate, also known as Sixth Form Baccalaureate. Enrolment is by gender, i.e. boys and girls go to separate schools; i.e. high schools for boys and high schools for girls.

### Preparatory education (second stage of general secondary education): weekly lesson timetable (2010)

Table 3.

Subject	4 <sup>th</sup> class (Grade 10)		5 <sup>th</sup> class (Grade 11)		6 <sup>th</sup> class (Grade 12)	
	Sci.	Lit.	Sci.	Lit.	Sci.	Lit.
Islamic education	3	3	3	3	3	3
Arabic language	5	5	4	7	5	8
Kurdish language	2	2	-	-	-	-
English language	5	5	5	5	6	6
History	-	3	-	3	-	3
Geography	-	3	-	3	-	3
Philosophy and Psychology	-	-	-	2	-	-
Sociology		2	-	-	-	-
Economics	-	-	-	2	-	3
Mathematics	4	3	6	3	6	3
Chemistry	3	-	3	-	4	-
Physics	3	-	3	-	4	-
Biology	3	-	3	-	4	-
Physical education	2	2	2	2	2	2
Art education	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total weekly periods	31	29	30	31	35	32
Computer*	2					
French*	5					
Christianity*	2		2		2	
Assyrian *(Syriac)	2		2		2	
Torkmanish*	2		2		2	
Izidis*	2		2		2	

\*not included in the final examination Table (3) shows subjects taught at the preparatory stage with time (periods) allotted to each subject per week.

Source: Ministry of Education (Baghdad and Kurdistan), 2011. Family education is taught in girls schools for one class per week. Schools that teach foreign languages intensively (i.e. French, Spanish, Russian) plus ICT add classes for the respective subjects. (Each teaching period lasts 40 minutes in double-shift schools and 45 minutes in single-shift school). Sci. = Science stream; Lit. = Literary stream (UNESCO, 2011:17).

It can be obviously noticed from the table above that religious education classes for Christians and Izidis are not included in the national final examinations for the certificate of the

Secondary School Baccalaureate whereas the Islamic religious education for Muslims is considered for that and it becomes a privilege and an advantage for them over their colleagues non-Muslim students (see the appendix).

According to UNESCO, in 2008 there were 5,409 secondary schools. The total enrolment was about 1.8 million students at the center and some 178,000 students in Kurdistan Region. The number of teachers was about 128,000 at the center and 11,000 in the region. The student-teacher ratio was 14:1. In terms of teachers' qualifications, 98% of teachers were university degree holders (UNESCO Iraq Office, 2011 as cited in UNESCO, 2011:18).

### **Vocational Education**

Vocational education is an alternative for pupils who fail to pass the exams after primary education or who want to pursue their study in this field. It includes schools in the fields of industry, commerce, agriculture and home science, with 21 areas of specialization. The vocational education is a three - year duration (grades 10 – 12), ending with national examinations. The top 10% of students in these final examinations can go on to pursue degree programs in technical institutes (UNESCO, 2011:18).

According to UNESCO, in 2008 there were 289 vocational schools at the center (200 for boys, 70 for girls and 19 coeducational) and 33 schools in Kurdistan Region (11 for girls, 8 for boys and 14 coeducational). The total enrolment was about 61,000 at the center and some 7,000 in the region. The number of teachers was some 12,000 and the average students-teacher ratio was 5:1 (UNESCO Iraq Office, 2011 as cited by UNESCO, 2011:18).

### **Higher Education**

Higher Education has deep roots in Iraq. During the centuries when Baghdad was the centre of the Muslim world, as the capital of the caliph, it also was one of the main centers of learning in the Muslim world.

The country's first university was first established in 1957. Today, Iraq has a fair number of higher institutions, with two main centers, Baghdad and Irbil, the latter the capital of the Kurdistan Region. Iraqi universities have since long followed the structure of Bachelor and Master Studies. In most fields, Bachelor's take 4 years; exceptions are Architecture, Dentistry, and Pharmacy. Medicine is 6 years. Classes are mainly mixed in gender.

Iraq's current higher education system comprises 24 universities and 42 technical institutes under the management of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). This includes 200 colleges, 800 departments and 28 research centers. There are also 25 private colleges offering different programs with the American University of Iraq in Sulaymannia whose curriculum is based on the US model. Nation-wide, there are 350,000 undergraduate students, 15,000 postgraduate students and nearly 30,000 teaching faculty. The major fields of study offered by the universities are : education , arts , law , social sciences , administration , economics, natural sciences , engineering and technology , medical sciences , veterinary medicine and agriculture ( Republic of Iraq , National Investment Commission,2012).

## **Religious Education in Iraqi Schools**

The following section deals with the religious education in Iraqi schools before and after 2003. In both periods the focus has been on Islamic religious education and marginalizing the other Iraqi religious minorities.

Islam has long been taught in Iraq's schools, and until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 reflected the beliefs of the then-powerful minority Sunni sect (Mohammed 2010) and then the Shi'a's.

### **Religious Education in Iraq during Saddam's Regime (Before 2003)**

There was no respect for religious freedom during the reign of Saddam Hussein and the Bath party. Although Shi'a Arabs are the largest religious group, Sunni Arabs traditionally have dominated economic and political life. Sunni Arabs are at a distinct advantage in all areas of secular life. The Government also severely restricts or bans outright many Shi'a religious practices.

Shi'a Arabs, the religious majority of the population, long have been disadvantaged economically, politically, and socially. Christians and the rest of the Iraqi religious minorities also report various abuses including repression of religious and political rights.

The Interim Constitution, during Saddam's regime, provides for freedom of religion provided that it does not violate "morality and public order"; however, the Government severely restricts this right in practice. Islam is the official state religion. Other religions are practiced in the country, but the Government exercises repressive measures against any religious groups or organizations that are deemed not to provide full political and social support. The Interim Constitution does not provide for the recognition of Assyrians, Chaldeans, or Izidis (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2002).

The Government did not permit education in languages other than Arabic and Kurdish, the latter was practiced only in the recognized Kurdish area in the north of the country. Kurds living outside the Kurdish area were not permitted to have their education in Kurdish as there were no schools where the language of instruction is Kurdish. Public instruction in Assyrian, which was announced under a 1972 decree, never was implemented. Thus, in areas under government control, Assyrian and Chaldean children were not permitted to attend classes in Assyrian. The same applied to religious education in schools. Islamic education classes were the only religious education received by Muslim students; minority students did not receive any religious education in schools at all.

Saddam Hussein established the "Faith Campaign," the project that made all school obligated to teach Islamic religion classes. In those religion classes, students are to memorize passages from the Quran along with attached "explanation" of every verse. No one discussed those verses, but everyone memorized them and memorized their "explanation." This is very dangerous because it limits students from questioning and "if we don't question, we are not more than machines that operate on food. Our future depends on how we score in the national standardized tests. We have one in each 6th, 9th, and 12th grade. The one taken in the 12th grade determines which field you can pursue in your studies. It is sad to see that our society glorifies those two fields while it discourages studies in the fields of social studies, arts, and humanities", a student said (Rawaf, 2009). Until 2003, the curriculum reflected the beliefs of the Sunni sect, whose members included the former leader, Saddam Hussein. Sunni Arabs are a minority in Iraq, accounting for between a quarter and a fifth of the total population.

### Religious Education After 2003

The religious freedom situation in Iraq remains grave, particularly for the country's smallest, most vulnerable religious minorities. The violence, forced displacement, discrimination, marginalization, and neglect suffered by members of these groups threaten these ancient communities' very existence in Iraq.

The vast majority of Iraqis are Muslims and schools teach the Islamic religion from the age of six to 18. Children from minority faiths, such as Christianity, Izidis and Sabeans, are free to skip Islamic lessons but cannot study their own religion at state-funded schools except in Kurdistan Region where Christians and Izidi students take their own religious education classes with textbooks published by the ministry of Education. But unfortunately the grades are not taken into accounts ; i.e. not credited for the national final examinations at the three stages of study. However, as we can see from the tables mentioned before the Christians and Izidis students can take religious education about their own faith in those areas where the minorities constitute the majority of the population. This means that minorities' students living outside those areas cannot take religious education classes, so they skip the class. The writer of this paper has heard stories from minorities' students complaining at least about two things: they feel religiously inferior and second they skip classes because Muslim students attend the religious classes. They have been accused by their colleagues of as being people of no religions as far as they didn't have a religious class to attend. The following true story is narrated by two boys and published in the WorldWide Religious News website (<http://wwrn.org>); one is a Christian and the other is a Muslim, who go to the same school in Baghdad and often ride home to the same district of Baghdad, but their parents do not share the same faith. Zuhair's family is Christian, and Ahmed's is Muslim. Recent religious lessons at school left Ahmed questioning what end awaits his friendship.

"Our teacher tells us it is forbidden in Islam to make friends with unbelievers, he [Ahmed] said." When I study that we have to fight the unbelievers in the name of Jihad, I think, Will I kill Zuhair one day?" (Mohammed, 2010:1)

"Ahmed's family is Muslim; Zuhair's is Christian. And it turns out that in Iraq's schools today, religious tolerance is not part of the curriculum. Religious education is a regular feature of public schools in Iraq. Because Zuhair is a Christian, he is not required to attend religious classes. But because the vast majority of his classmates are Muslims, Zuhair said he often feels alone and isolated. "When all of my friends are in the class, I have to stand outside, he [Zuhair] said " (Ibid).

Another crucial point can be inferred from the above mentioned tables is that the Iraqi Ministry of Education has given more time load to Islamic education than those given to the minorities'; four classes per week in the primary stage to Islamic education against nothing to minorities; three classes in the intermediate stage against two to the Christians, one to the Izidis and none to the Sabeans; and three to the Muslims and two to the Christians, two the Izidis and non to the Sabeans at the preparatory stage. (It is to ascertain that this only applies to the areas where the minorities constitute the majority of the population and not in all parts of Iraq). This state of fact, we believe, made minority students feel not only different but virtually discriminated against. We also believe that this is bound to leave serious fissures in the fabric of society and make the lack of socio-religious integrity a major impediment of national unity and political of the state. Minorities, therefore, can possibly be functionally reduced to second class citizens in a supposedly democratizing state.

Ahmed (2010) also believes that the main concerns about the school program are that it favors the Shi'a interpretation of Islam and some teachers focus on subjects not directly addressed in the curriculum, such as the treatment of non-Muslims and jihad, or holy war. On the other hand, Alaa Makki, a Sunni member of the Iraqi parliament and head of a parliamentary committee on education of 2006, said "the new curriculum was unbalanced and the current changes have a huge sectarian impact. The updating process should focus on the shared aspects (of Islam, not on a specific sect)" (Ahmed 2010). However, supporters of the new curriculum, say it merely rectifies past bias in religious education and accurately reflects Iraq's identity.

Mithal al-Alusi, an independent Sunni legislator who has adopted a secular platform, said the curriculum risked making Iraqi schools akin to the seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan that had fostered the hard-line Islamist Taleban militia. "Our Islamic curriculum does not even represent Islam. It is aimed at creating a fascist religious identity," he said. "I am concerned that we will have a new Taleban in Iraq when the current generation graduates from schools" (Mohammed, 2010b).

Here is another relevant story related by an Islamic studies teacher in Baghdad's Shaab district and published in the WorldWide Religious News website (<http://wwrn.org>):

Sana Muhsin, an Islamic studies teacher in Baghdad's shaab district, said she regularly instructs her students that "each Muslim had a duty to carry out jihad – namely to fight unbelievers." She identified unbelievers as those who did not follow Allah or the Prophet Mohammed (Mohammed, 2010:2).

Mohammed (2010:2) believes that the students appear to be learning the lesson by stating the following stories: Sajjad Liyayyad, 7, of Baghdad said he plans to become a holy warrior when he grows up. "I will fight the Americans because they are Jewish and unbelievers," he said. "I will be victorious, or I will be a martyr in heaven." Maryam Ali, 9, also of Baghdad, said she is carrying out her own jihad by calling on "unveiled female friends to their heads."

As regard to higher education in Iraq after 2003, Universities, experience hard and complicated circumstances. Universities, especially in Baghdad have been negatively influenced by political sectarianism that made students to enroll in sectarian factions who have nothing to do with the academic life of the university. Assassination and systematic killing of professors since 2003 has made a significant numbers of university professors leave the country to find a safe haven abroad.

Sectarianism within education is more dangerous than a sectarian constitution, for education is the support structure for the upbringing of future generations, and it will be the greatest crime - more dangerous than all the crimes perpetrated by the Saddam regime- if education becomes a playing field for political conflict, or the scene for the ugly sectarian fighting which we see throughout Iraq today (Mirghani, 2008).

If Iraq is to recover from the many issues which plague it today, including a sectarian inflammation which threatens its future and unity, then education must remain immune to sectarianism. Rather any modification to the Iraqi education curriculum should strengthen Iraqi unity and in the process keeping it away from any sectarian references (Ibid).

It is in the interests of Iraq and those who sympathize with the Iraqis to strongly oppose any project to divide the education curriculum towards sectarianism, for this would secure the separation and damage to future Iraqi generations. Schools and universities must remain well-fortified against sectarianism, just as it is in the interests of Iraq for the curriculum to lead not to division, but to unification, and be a tool to educate future generations of Iraqis away from political outbidding and sectarianism.

Education has to be out of the political and sectarian differences in the country. Both, the ministry of Education and the ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Affairs including presidents of universities and university professors have to play an active and significant role in making students aware of the danger and harm of the poetical sectarianism.

Kallo (2010) stated that the ministry of education has revised and modified the religious education syllabuses as a response to the political change in Iraq after 2003 and as a result of the hegemony of religious parties. Some of those 'Ahadeeth' that Sunni and Shia do not agree on have been taken out of the religious textbooks and new 'Ahadeeth' were added which are considered to be more credible. On the other hand, the ministry could not find a solution for the non-Muslim students, like Christians, Izidis and Sabeans. They were exempted from taking the religious education subject examinations. In this way, the ministry followed the same policy before 2003. The ministry was not able to write or present religious syllabuses for the minorities. In this way, the ministry did not treat Muslim and non-Muslim students equally but it favors the Muslim students as to this point because the Muslim students take advantage of the Islamic education grades, (see Kallo, 2010- [www.ankawa.com](http://www.ankawa.com) ).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

It has been noticed from the syllabuses of all the school stages in Iraq that there have been no syllabuses that tackle and respect the right of differences among people and do not promote and encourage the concepts of debates, recognition of the other, modesty and tolerance (Al-Fadhel 2007). It is obvious that those syllabuses are a sort of extension to the national Arabic Islamic school of education where most of the syllabuses deal with Jihad, fighting, wars and invasions of the Arab Muslims and the one religion worship without any reference to other religions and beliefs. These syllabuses also contain a contradicting mixture of ideas, traditions and values which in themselves reflect the political and religious conflicts in Iraq especially after 2003(Ibid).

This paper asserts that the religious education syllabuses in Iraq must help and promote dialogue, tolerance, modesty and recognition of the other religions and beliefs taking into consideration that Iraq is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country .Religious education should not be confined to Islam only; it should include all religions in Iraq as mentioned in the Iraqi institution of 2005. The Iraqi schools after 2003 should be able to present religious education objectively and transparently in such a way that can build for a new Iraqi personality and identity. Religious education at Iraqi schools should be taught according to a constructive methodology where the religious class does not distinguish between a Muslim student and a non-Muslim student; it should teach, help and encourage learners for 'goodness' and promote for the high values of religions , democracy, respect and tolerance. Also the religious education class and teachers should teach students that all religions are good and meet at one point. If the students realize this, then they can live and coexist peacefully and build for a new Iraq that is unified, free of sectarianism, violence and extremism.

This paper also recommends and calls for an urgent need to reform the educational curriculum and syllabuses in general and the religious education syllabuses in particular. The aims and objectives of teaching and education in Iraq should prepare all students to be citizens who genuinely believe in Iraqi citizenship, love and peace. Accordingly, this paper puts the following recommendations forward:

All Iraqi citizens should have access to learning and education of all kinds, including religious education, regardless of religion, sect, gender or social status.

Politics and religion should be entirely separated, especially when it comes to educational institutions. Educational institutions in Iraq including universities and other educational institutions should avoid the interference of politics and politicians in formulating their syllabuses.

The objectives of the religious education at schools must be independent of any religious inclination and indifferent to all religions and sects. Religious education should be based on the spirit of tolerance; it should not encourage, by any means, any activity or/and ideology that may constitute any sort of threat to the social integrity, stability and peace of the society.

Religious education textbooks should be revised and rewritten in such a way that freedom of religion is promoted and must help for the development of spirituality and inter-faith dialogue. It should develop critical religious literacy. Religious textbooks should develop an awareness of, and respect for the views and beliefs of others. Religious textbooks should present the positive aspects of all religious views.

As regard to writing and composing of religious education textbooks, we suggest that a multi-religious committee, including experts from all the Iraqi religions and sects, be formed to write or/and recommend writing religious education textbooks that call, encourage and promote for love, tolerance, acceptance and respect for all religions and beliefs. As regard to the Islamic religious education textbooks and syllabuses, we suggest that those syllabuses should avoid the details of differences between Shi'a and Sunni. This demands accuracy and objectivity in choosing and interpreting the Quaranic verses, texts and Ahadeeth. The same applies to all religious and historic Islamic figures and characters.

Religious education should promote positive attitudes, as an individual and as a whole in school, so people see themselves as an equaled and valued member of a multi-faith community. It should introduce world religions in a way that students can have a better understanding of each other religions and to understand the nature of religious beliefs and practices. The religious education at public schools in Iraq should contribute to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students at all the stages of the study.

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18. Appendix showing that the non-Muslim students are not benefitted from the Religious Education grades. عم is an Arabic abbreviation stands and equivalent for non-Muslim

وزارة التربية - اللجنة الدائمة للإمتحانات العامة امتدات حراتى وعممه كز فحص الدراسة الإعدادية - مشروع الدفتر الإلكتروني

اعدادية بعثية للبنين

am

مديرية تربية : نفوى

2010 - 2009

الدور الأول



الفرع العلمي : افرع العلمى

المحل	المجموع	النتيجة	لغات	الفيزياء	الكيمياء	رياضيات	الأحياء	الإنجليزية	العربية	الإسلامية	الإسم الثلاثي واللقب	الرقم الإمتحاني	تسلسل
87.29	611	ناجح		96	91	71	88	98	78	89	ابراهيم محمد طاهر نجم سلطان	171011059001	1
0	0	مكمل		98	85	89	صفر	م	69	89	محمد ثامر عزيز يونس	171011059002	2
0	0	مكمل		م	57	52	صفر	79	72	70	محمد حاسم محمد حبيب	171011059003	3
0	0	مكمل		م	م	25	40	74	50	79	محمد خالد محمد عبد الله	171011059004	4
67.86	475	ناجح		76	68	50	55	68	74	84	محمد زكري سليمان سليمان	171011059005	5
0	0	مكمل		71	64	72	صت	79	59	77	محمد سليمان رجب حسن	171011059006	6
79.71	558	ناجح		70	81	79	81	86	77	84	محمد عثمانور عبد الله صوفك	171011059007	7
69.29	485	ناجح		81	77	66	55	66	67	73	محمد عزيز محمود عبد الله	171011059008	8
0	0	مكمل		98	ع	85	82	89	85	ع	محمد نعمت يونس محمود	171011059009	9
55.14	386	ناجح		58	56	53	50	50	63	56	اسماء زينل اسماعيل سليم	171011059010	10
0	0	مكمل		95	78	84	92	88	ع	ع.م	اسماعيل خليل خضر سينو	171011059012	11
58.57	410	ناجح		62	50	50	58	63	60	67	اياد حاسم محمود حميد	171011059015	12
85.17	511	ناجح		87	92	92	77	83	80	ع.م	ليان عزت ايلى يونس	171011059016	13
69.86	489	ناجح		71	70	80	53	51	79	85	يمن نعمت محمد عثمانور	171011059017	14
65.57	459	ناجح		68	66	64	50	58	68	85	يمن هيثم سلطان حسين	171011059018	15
90.5	543	ناجح		98	92	89	96	94	74	ع.م	ايهاب ثامر جليل يونس	171011059019	16
0	0	مكمل		62	65	59	صفر	50	62	ع.م	ايهاب جمعة الياس سليم	171011059020	17
67	402	ناجح		66	64	65	64	80	63	ع.م	ايهاب سلام شمدين نقاشا	171011059021	18
0	0	مكمل		81	39	71	صفر	51	51	ع.م	ايهاب فخران نقيب حسن	171011059022	19
0	0	مكمل		56	82	70	صفر	61	64	ع.م	ايهاب نايف جمعة الياس	171011059023	20
0	0	مكمل		50	50	53	36	50	52	ع.م	يامل الياس عدي ناصر	171011059024	21
59.83	359	ناجح		61	64	73	56	50	55	ع.م	سامر بسام بشير ايوب	171011059026	22
0	0	مكمل		66	62	67	58	40	68	م	مشعل عادم حيدر صالح	171011059027	23
0	0	مكمل		78	م	م	51	م	52	68	بيات اسماعيل احمد رضا	171011059028	24
0	0	مكمل		54	50	56	م	40	38	ع.م	يبر عائد حيران توفيق	171011059029	25
70.14	491	ناجح		69	53	69	64	74	64	98	حسام مشعان محمود عزى	171011059031	26
0	0	مكمل		صت	م	62	صفر	79	67	78	حسن الياس عباس علي	171011059032	27
0	0	مكمل		50	50	53	52	41	58	78	حسين علي قنات علي	171011059033	28
56.33	338	ناجح		60	52	63	50	63	50	ع.م	حكيم مخلص سنى كمشو	171011059034	29