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Academia in the crosshairs

POLITICAL AND sectarian violence has not only paralyzed Iraq's economy and destabilized its government, it has brought the nation's once thriving educational system to the brink of collapse. Iraqi academics and teachers face daily threats to their lives.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, between 250 and 1,000 Iraqi professors have been killed, according to the London-based Council for Assisting Refugee Academics. Human rights groups and media reports estimate that hundreds more have been detained, tortured or intimidated.

In January, two car bombs and a suicide bomber exploded at the main gate of Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, killing at least 70 people. Last October the head of the University Professors' Union, Dr. Essam al-Rawi, was assassinated outside his Baghdad home as he left for work. In November, gunmen dressed in Iraqi police uniforms abducted scores of educational workers from the Ministry of Higher Education. Other schoolteachers have been kidnapped, terrorized, and killed, sometimes in front of their students.

Academics, scientists, and members of the intelligentsia have been singled out for attack, and roughly 30 percent of all professors, doctors, pharmacists, and engineers in Iraq have fled since the war began, according to Iraqi government officials.

Unfortunately, this systematic targeting of scholars and scientists, and the accompanying repression of intellectual freedom, is not a new phenomenon. In the 20th century, intellectuals and academics faced extermination, imprisonment, and isolation under numerous regimes, including Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Argentina, Cambodia, Uganda, and the People's Republic of China. In the 21st century, scholars in Iran, Burma, Zimbabwe, and many other nations are arrested, fired, and otherwise silenced when they dare question government policies or express ideas at odds with those in authority.

The United States has a long tradition of freedom of intellectual inquiry.

The Supreme Court has ruled repeatedly that the First Amendment protects the freedom of scholars and

students to challenge orthodoxies and explore new, uncharted areas of intellectual inquiry. In return for this protection, our educational system — the largest in the world — strengthens our democracy: it informs citizens about critical issues, illuminates the world and our experience of it, stimulates debate, and helps solve emerging problems.

Yet we cannot take the independence of our academic institutions for granted.

While teachers and professors face scrutiny from politicians beholden to specific agendas, high school science teachers in some states are forced to add scientifically untested (and sometimes untestable) theories to their curriculum. Literature teachers protest the removal from their reading lists of some of America's most acclaimed novels, including Toni Morrison's "Be-loved," John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men," and Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five."

Library records are subject to government surveillance under provisions of the USA Patriot Act.

These examples of curtailment of American academic freedom pale in comparison with the systematic extermination of Iraqi intellectuals, but the common elements of both degrees of pressure on academic freedom are unsettling.

Education of quality, by its nature, questions what some people think they know, and governments in power seldom embrace critics of their authority.

Yet academic inquiry is an essential source of reason and wisdom, especially in troubling times. Iraq needs its scientists, teachers, educated professionals, creative artists, and other intellectuals if it is to rebuild a functioning society.

Those Iraqi academics who have chosen to stay, or cannot leave, need our vocal and ardent support, as do intellectuals everywhere. Intellectual freedom is a cornerstone of modern democratic life. We must defend it.

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