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A Cautious Comeback on Campus

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At Baghdad University, Students Welcome the Decline in Violence, but Still Look Toward the Future Warily

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BAGHDAD, Jan. 14 -- During his eight-year endeavor to complete his undergraduate degree, Haider Swadi Kareem has witnessed more than he'd care to remember at Baghdad University.

From the vantage point of a plastic table in the student cafeteria, Kareem watched the point-blank slaying of a 22-year-old U.S. soldier, shot in the back of the head after buying a 7-Up. That was in the summer of 2003. In the same cafeteria, Kareem later saw fliers scattered on the concrete floor demanding that all students abandon the university, by the order of al-Qaeda in [Iraq](#).

He has watched as friends have died and teachers have left the country. His family fled for southern Iraq and insurgents took over his childhood home in Baghdad, forcing him to live alone in a dorm room on campus.

"When I first got here it was safe," he recalled wistfully.

And how is it now? For Kareem and some other students, professors and administrators, the answer is "better," but a tentative, heavily qualified better. As levels of violence have fallen in Baghdad over the past six months, the tension at the university has lessened, with more people returning to their studies and trying to turn their thoughts to the future.

The campus is something of an oasis in Baghdad, and the diverse student body, from all over the city and the country, offers a glimpse into the national mood at a time when Iraqis are experiencing a relative lull in the war.

With 80,000 undergraduates, Baghdad University is the largest in Iraq. It is protected on three sides by water and on the fourth by plainclothes gunmen. Its location on a peninsula formed by a bend in the Tigris River, in a relatively peaceful neighborhood where several prominent politicians have their compounds, has helped keep it from suffering the kind of gruesome bombings inflicted on other campuses in the capital. Still, about 80 professors, and many more students, have been killed since the war began, university officials said.

During the last school year, about 50 percent of students went to class regularly and hundreds of faculty members took unpaid leaves of absence. This year, attendance is about 80 percent and many teachers have returned, said Riyadh Aziz Hadi, the university's assistant president.

"Of course there are many challenges, but less than before, because the security situation, while not 100 percent, has improved," he said. "I can't say that I'm optimistic. But I hope."

Outside Hadi's office, on a stone bench shaded by a small tree, first-year student Sajar Khudair Abed, 18, surveyed the courtyard, filled with groups of chatting friends and students rushing to class. Her threshold for judging improvement was admittedly low.

"Look around, you cannot see people killing each other, bombing each other. Of course it's safer," she said. "We feel we are safer here than being at home."

Several students, however, described a persistent culture of intimidation and intolerance. Fliers celebrating the family of Moqtada al-Sadr, the leader of one of Iraq's most powerful Shiite militias, are tacked to campus buildings, despite the administration's ban on political activity on campus. The majority of women wear head scarves and say that dressing in a more Western style, which many say they prefer, attracts dangerous attention in the strict religious climate.

"You know, for example, we are two girls and a man," said computer science student Nour Kamal, 21, as she sat with friends eating popcorn in the cafeteria. "Some people don't like this idea at all, girls talking to a man. They will instantly mark you with an X. These people are savages."

Abbas Saad, 21, recalls a heated conversation about Islam he had with a group of classmates during his freshman year. Two days after the argument, a dozen of the students involved were abducted as they left the campus; he said their fates were unknown. "I don't talk about religion very much anymore," he said.

Saad took a year off while his family was moving from Mahmudiyah, a town south of Baghdad in what is known as the Triangle of Death, after his uncle was beheaded by insurgents.

"If you will compare the security situation to last year it is much better. Last year even the professors were afraid to come to class," he said. "But of course the militias are inside the university, and they're involved in almost everything."

Living with this constant state of wariness infuriates Sara Mohammed, a 22-year-old chemical engineering student. She wears jangly silver bracelets and thick blue eye shadow, and refuses to cover her black hair. "There are so many things we can't do," she said.

The chemical engineering laboratories have only the most meager equipment. The students read photocopied versions of old textbooks. Their degrees are not recognized outside the country. A barren job market awaits them after graduation. A former student sitting nearby said he paid a bribe of \$200 to the Labor Ministry to secure his employment.

Mohammed said she was abducted last year and held for a day in western Baghdad before her parents paid \$50,000 -- "everything we had," she said -- to secure her release. She believes that her acquaintances at the university arranged the kidnapping.

"Everybody around us now could kill you," she said loudly, motioning at her peers in the cafeteria, while her friends at the table urged her to be quiet. "I hate this country," she said, ignoring them. "Believe me, I hate this country."

Later that day, she wrote a text message in rough English about how she was simply tired of being afraid. "Tooday my friends tell me that Sara are u crazy! How u dare! There's many derty eays watching. I said God is hear with us thats all."

Yet whether born of fatigue, or defiance or a desire to forget, the outlines of a more stable routine have emerged on campus. Many students' complaints have descended from the terrifying heights of life-and-death to the mundane concerns of clogged traffic, high tuition costs for evening classes, insufficient rest and the difficulty of finding time to picnic with friends.

Several students complained that seasoned professors who have fled the country have been replaced by younger, inexperienced lecturers. Professor Majid Salman, 37, who has spent 12 years at the university, said the classroom dynamic also has changed.

"The relationship between the lecturer and the students is closer now, better than before the war. We're more like equals," Salman said. But he has a few gripes of his own. "The students now are not afraid to tell you their opinion about you. Or they will go to the head of the department and tell him, 'We want to change our professor.' I guess we have democracy now."

Special correspondent Dalya Hassan contributed to this report.

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