

Access and barriers to higher education for Yazidi minority students in Iraq

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Student Reports on their Living Situation

Results from focus group work

Female, Dohok University, in Dormitory

I am a female student of biology at the University of Dohok. I live with my two brothers and my mother in a camp in Zacho. My brothers are also students of pharmacy and psychology. My father left us five years ago, so we have no income or provider. In 2014 we got displaced from a collective town in Sinjar. After displacement, because of our financial situation I, even though I am the oldest in the family, I had to postpone my studies for two years. I gladly sacrificed myself for my brothers. My brothers took turns in working and studying. My mother often suffers from illness and depression so for us it is also very hard to have her all alone in the camp when we are at university. At university I am the only Yazidi student in my department. In the dormitory I share a room with two other Yazidi girls, but because of my postponement I am much older than them (27 years) and I often feel alone. I wish I had more money to visit or be with my mother more often. Sometimes I cannot concentrate on my studies because I think about what happened to us in 2014 and worry about her being alone.

Female, Zacho University, in Camp

I am 21 years old and I got displaced from a small town in Sinjar in 2014. ISIS attacked our village and separated us. My older brother, who was a high-school student and my father who was a teacher were captured. They were the only people feeding the family. Since then we did not get any piece of information from them. Probably they are not alive to be honest. I suffered a lot with my poor siblings and my mother. Sometimes I was thinking about committing suicide might be a solution. However, I was totally sure that my mother would not bear with my depart as well. After I could stand again on my feet. There is a big predicament I am facing. All my siblings are students. They all need to be fed. And the source of feeding is missing sorrowfully. Now I am studying at the University of Zacho. Travelling from my camp to University costs me 50.000 IRQ per month. When I ask my mother about it she often begins to cry because she does not have anything to give me. To make the matter worse, about a year ago the government stopped giving us my father's salary. They said we don't know if he is alive or not. I would love to complete my studies. This is the only dream that keeps me alive.

Male, Mosul Uni., shared room, rent

I am 24 years old and I live with my father, my mother, 3 brothers and 5 sisters in a village near Zacho. Two of my sisters study in Dohok and two of my brothers go to school. I am the only one at Mosul university. After the genocide in Kajo all Sinjalee people left to Kurdistan. My father was a farmer. Now, displaced and over 60 he is unemployed. Both of my parents have severe health problems. I study economics at Mosul University. This is very expensive. I need to raise the 3005 I need per month all by myself. During study periods I cannot work because my study is hard and it is important for me to be an excellent student because I wish to be accepted for a master. During holiday time I work as a daily worker. I do any job. I was a cleaner in another town in Kurdistan, did construction work in various places. I am currently working daily. I sometimes only earn a dollar per hour. This year I am very worried about my financials because I could not work all holiday because my study required me to do a 6-week-internship. Now as the study time starts I know I don't have enough to cover my whole semester. Some of my friend suggests I only go to university four out of five days a week to reduce transport cost, but I am afraid this will affect my marks.

Female, graduated from Mosul University

I am 24 years old and my family lives in one of the IDP camps in the north part of Iraq. What I suffered during my studies cannot be written in lines or sentences but here is my story in brief: ISIS war destroyed everything in my life besides my dream of being a good doctor. Even I could not pursue and be successful in another subject. After ISIS controlled my city and all Yazidi people escaped to Kurdistan. We were so scared, so we tried to pass through Turkish border illegally but we failed staying in a village in the bordering. The time was difficult and miserable. At that time I was not in school but I borrowed 6th stage preparatory books from a friend who lived far away from us. I only had one week time to learn for the final exam. I would have given up if I was not so strong. Despite of my bad condition I got a high average up to score 95.83%. This helped me to get accepted to study petroleum engineering in 2015. Although it was something different and unusual for a Yazidi girl to travel and live far in an unsafe place, where ISIS might attack any time, I decided to join the college in Kirkuk. I stayed in a dormitory with girls from different background for two years. The years were very hard, one of the most terrible days was when I have been surrounded by ISIS with some friends at our living house. But I managed to be saved for the second time. I then traveled to complete my study at Mosul university. I stayed with 6 girls in an unfinished building in Bashiqa, after it got liberated by Iraqi forces. At the beginning we had no water and electricity and needed to invest time and money to make it livable. At university I did wear a hijab to not show my Yazidi identity. But my colleagues knew I was Yazidi. For me it was difficult to trust the Muslim colleagues after what happened. Often I felt very lonely at my department and out for communication and social activities. After a very big effort I have recently graduated and I am the first female Yazidi that ever graduated from our department in Iraq and I am so grateful to God. But I am also afraid. My marks are not as good as I hoped and I am worried it will be very difficult for me to find a job.

Female, dropped-out

I am 25 years old. I am Ezidi from Sinjar (Shingal). I have 2 brothers and five sisters. My family lives in a camp southwest of Dohok. I live with my uncle in a simple house. My uncle built it for the family. We are 4 students. I am studied in the university since 2015 and I chose Geography Department because I love Geography. I really wanted to continue my studies at Mosul university. But now I cannot continue because they closed their temporary campus in Dohok and I can't go because Mosul is still dangerous for us as Ezidis. I am originally from Sinjar – a small town and we are displaced from there, my family is affected in so many ways, but mostly psychologically. I had to give up my study because I could not afford the expenses for transportation and I don't have an accommodation to stay during my study. But also I had that, my family would not let me travel to Mosul alone, especially as a girl.

Introduction

Yazidis were one of the most affected minorities in recent conflicts in Iraq. Almost all Yazidi people have been displaced after 2014, with only few being able to return to their homes (IOM, 2019). Living situations are very critical as the majority of displaced Yazidis is forced to live in one of the 17 official camps of internally displaced people or outside in incomplete building structures (KRSO, IOM & UNFPA, 2018).

Displacement and war-related trauma also affected educational opportunities of young people at large. Even though schooling is offered it is estimated that only about 65 to 75 percent of all school aged children and youth are attending school (UNHCR, 2019). In a survey conducted in 2017 lack of interest, the need to support the family and finances were most common reasons given for absenteeism and drop-out, in addition discrimination was a mentioned factor. Also the lack of qualified personnel, bad infrastructure and low quality are argued to contribute to low attendance rates (REACH, 2017). Hosseini and Seidi (2018) found trauma and psychological problems to be an additional factor. Shanks (2018) showed that access to education is not just further complicated by different curricula and languages of instructions offered in different parts of the country and therefore limited offerings under circumstances of displacement, but also a diffusion of authorities in so called "disputed areas".

Whereas the access and barriers to schooling have been at least touched by literature, little to nothing is known about access and barriers to higher education. The aim of this research is to further understand access and barriers for students from Yazidi minority in Iraq.

Methods

The study was conducted in 2019. A mixed-method design was applied, comprising a survey component and a focus-group component.

Survey: A survey was conducted in autumn 2019 using the google survey tool. The focus was on Yazidi students in critical circumstances. Participants were recruited via social media and student representatives at various universities. More than 600 students participated, which makes up about 15% of the estimated total population of Yazidi students in Iraq. In our analysis we included 453 students, from the major universities serving students from the Yazidi Community: University of Duhok (n=172), Mosul University (n=174), University of Zakho (n=93) and Duhok Polytechnic University (n=74). As part of the survey students were asked 25 questions on their living and study situation.

Focus group: A group of 35 students from various universities were met in focus group discussions over the year 2019. Students discussed issues on study situations of Yazidi students at various Iraqi universities. As part of these focus groups students formulate portraits of different cases of student situations.

Finding 1: Yazidi students are underrepresented in Iraqi Universities

	University of Mosul			%	University of Duhok	
	male	female	total		total	%
Total students at the University	21252	18509	39761 ¹		19615	
Yazidi students.			1130 ²	2,8	1965 ²	10,0
in Bashiqa/Barzani	729	221	950			
in Camps in Kurdistan region			180			

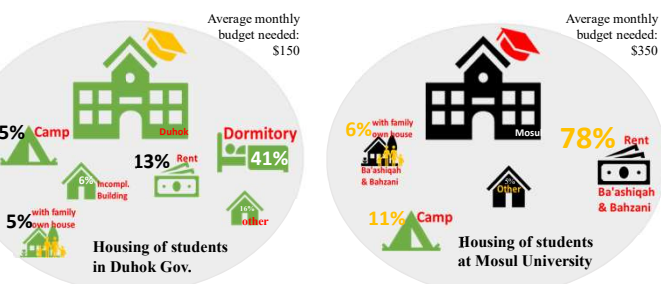
¹ According to the International Office of Mosul University (1. August 2019)

² According to student representative (9. July 2019)

Table 1: Numbers of students at main Universities serving students from the Yazidi community

In 2000 Yazidi people made up between 10 to 16 percent of the population in the Ninawa Governorate. As shown in table 1 today only 2.8 percent of students at Mosul University, which is the main higher education institution in the region, are members of the Yazidi community. Especially female students are underrepresented: Whereas for the total student population of Mosul University gender parity is almost achieved, only about 23 percent of the Yazidi students at Mosul University are female. In Dohok Governorate after displacement, depending on the estimate, the Yazidis make up between a quarter to a third of the overall population. Therefore with 10 percent also at Dohok University Yazidi students can be considered to be underrepresented.

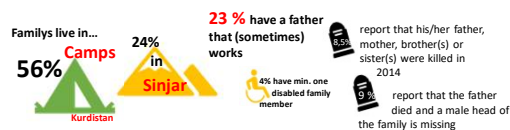
Finding 2: Most students suffer from challenging housing situations



Infographic 1: Living conditions of Yazidi students

In the survey students reported on their living situations and study related cost. As shown in the infographic 1 living situations and study related cost vary substantially between the different study contexts.

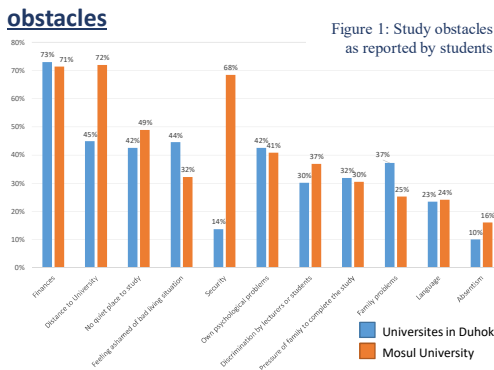
Finding 3: Most students do not have a main provider to support their studies financially



Infographic 2: Family situations of Yazidi students

As part of the survey students reported on the living situations and characteristics of their families. From infographic 2 it becomes apparent that the majority of students' families live under critical circumstances either in camps or as returnees in the Sinjar region, which has been vastly destroyed under ISIS and therefore lacks in most places of basic infrastructure. It also becomes apparent that the majority of families there is no income provided by the father.

Finding 4: Finances, security and the distance to universities are the biggest study obstacles



As part of the survey students were asked which factors are affecting their studies. As shown in figure 1 finances, security and distances are major study barriers. But also psychological problems, poverty, family pressure to finish the studies and social factors are affecting the studies. For at least a third of the students at both universities well-being factors are additional barriers. Biggest differences between the different study contexts are apparent with regard to distance and security. Both factors are prevalent for students at Mosul University.

Conclusions

Little is known about educational situations in Iraq. If at all reports by international organizations provide some insights. To further understand limited access and barriers to education, especially minorities sound research is needed. This knowledge may not just create awareness, but may also help to identify meaningful support opportunities.

Our research, as a first puzzle piece, clearly shows the critical study conditions of students from the Yazidi minority. It became apparent that not just external factors, such as finances and security are obstacles to studying. Also the universities themselves are required to ensure a safe study environment in which students feel well and supported.

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