
THE CHILDREN OF MOSUL GO BACK TO SCHOOL AS ISIL IS PUSHED OUT OF IRAQ'S SECOND CITY

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On a bright but chilly winters morning, the students of the Al Kufa boys' school sat tightly packed in their unlit classroom.

Seventy-five boys between the age of six to eight were crammed into the room, four to a bench, wearing jackets and woollen hats to protect them from the cold.

Three weeks ago, they became the first students in Mosul to go back to school after Iraqi forces finally cleared Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil) militants out of the eastern side of the city.

The months-long battle disrupted the electricity supply, and the 800 boys at Al Kufa have to sit through their lessons without light or heating. But it has not dampened their enthusiasm.

"When you are at home all the time its like being in prison," said Ahmed, a third-year student who is fortunate enough to be taught in a room where the sun shines through the windows, providing light and a little warmth.

Isil did keep some schools running during its two and a half year occupation of Mosul. But most parents shunned these institutions, where the terrorist group provided its own teachers and the curriculum had a strong jihadist bent, said Sahab Ali, the headmaster of Al Kufa.

Only about thirty pupils, children of Isil members or sympathisers, attended the girls school the jihadists set up on Al Kufas premises, he said.

"I urged my friends not to send their children to these schools," he said.

Thirty schools have reopened in Mosul so far, welcoming back 16,000 students, according to Unicef. Forty more schools serving a further 24,000 children are expected to open in the coming weeks.

While Al Kufa's two-storied, sand coloured building survived the battle unscathed, other schools have not been so lucky.

Isil used many of them as military bases, and dozens of buildings were heavily damaged by airstrikes or fighting.

While their colleagues at other schools are still waiting to return to work, the teachers at Al Kufa are busier than ever.

Because boys who reached school age during the occupation were prevented from beginning their education for over two years, the first year classes have at least doubled in size.

And after going without pay for more than two years, most teachers are also in a dire financial situation.

"We had to borrow money, use up our savings, rely on our relatives. We had to sell our gold and our cars," said Laith Mohammed, an Arabic teacher.

The government has promised to reinstate salaries by the end of February, almost two months after teaching resumed at Al Kufa.

On top of that, the mornings lessons are still punctuated by the thud of artillery fire.

A US mortar battery has set up close by, said Mr Ali, a reminder that the struggle for Mosul is not over.

The mortars fire across the Tigris river into the western half of Mosul, where an estimated 650,000 civilians are still living under Isils rule, and school yards remain quiet.

Kaynak/Source: