

## The psychological impact of the American war on Iraqi children (2003-2010)

### الأثر النفسي للحرب الأمريكية على أطفال العراق (2010-2003)

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**Abstract:** War, as a destabilizing force, is considered to be among the greatest dangers that threaten the physical and the mental wellbeing of civilians everywhere. The main focus of the present study is to shed light on the suffering of Iraqi children by the time of United States led- invasion. The American invasion of Iraq was initiated in March 2003 and triggered a wave of violence and turmoil in the country, in which children were major victims of this war due to the negative effects of this armed conflict on their lives. Memories of bombing and killing were likely to affect the mental wellbeing of children at the moment and even in the future as it had a long-term effect. The suffering of Iraqi children was not a new thing as it dated back to different successive events: The Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1990-1991), the United Nation's sanctions on Iraq (1990) and finally the American war (2003). The aim of this paper is to understand how the war deprived children from their basic needs, supportive environment, educational and other psychological resources that promote their development, this situation led to a significant psychological harm due to the persistent threat of war and the lack of social security. Psychological problems like depression, trauma and mental disorder became part of the life of Iraqi children.

**-Keywords:** Children- health- invasion- Iraq-psychological- trauma.

**الملخص:** الحرب باعتبارها قوة لا استقرار، هي من بين أعظم المخاطر التي تهدد السلامة الذهنية والجسدية للمدنيين في كل مكان. تركز الدراسة الحالية على معاناة أطفال العراق إبان الاحتلال الأمريكي، والذي بدأ في مارس العام 2003 وأدى إلى موجة من العنف والاضطراب في البلاد. حيث كان الأطفال الضحية الرئيسية لهذه الحرب لما لها من تأثيرات سلبية على حياتهم. إن ذكريات التفجير والقتل غالبا ما أثرت على نفسيات الأطفال في ذلك الوقت وحتى في المستقبل لما لها من أثر بعيد المدى. معاناة أطفال العراق ليست أمرا جديدا بل هي تعود لأحداث متتالية: الحرب العراقية الإيرانية (1980-1988)، حرب الخليج (1990-1991)، العقوبات الأممية (1990) وأخيرا الحرب الأمريكية (2003). تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إبراز أثر الحرب في حرمان الأطفال من احتياجاتهم الأساسية، الجو الملائم، التعليم وكل مصادر الدعم النفسي التي تساعد على نموهم، هذا الوضع أدى إلى أذى نفسي كبير بسبب

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التهديد المستمر للحرب وانعدام الأمن الاجتماعي. إن المشاكل النفسية مثل الاكتئاب، الصدمة والاضطراب العقلي كلها أصبحت جزءاً من حياة أطفال العراق.

- الكلمات المفتاحية: الأطفال؛ احتلال؛ العراق؛ صحة؛ صدمة نفسية.

## 1-Introduction:

War, by all means, represents a clear violation to human rights due to the negative and the persistent effect it leaves on the lives of those who witness it. War impacts societies in different ways and its effect is not only felt both at the short and the long term. The danger of war stems from the fact that its wounds cannot easily dealt with them, apart from creating difficult life conditions, it also impacts the well being of civilians.

Children are also victims of wars like adults do. The psychological and the physical well being of children is highly affected by all kinds of armed conflicts, as the latter leads to rising an aggressive violent young and changed the way they understand their traditions and viewed their world, meaning that war is a real threat to children psychological balance and social adaptation. Iraqi children represent a good case in point when talking about the impact of war on children especially from the psychological side. For more than thirty years, wars and embargos were forming part of the lives of Iraqi children. These hard conditions were of great influence on the Iraqi society as it led to the emergence of negative habits and crimes which the Iraqi society was not used to(dakak,2010).

The American occupation of Iraq ,2003, marked a turning point for a whole generation of Iraqi children. On March 22, 2003, president George Walker Bush told the United States that "our mission [the Americans] is clear, to disarm Iraq of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), to end Saddam's support of terrorism and to free the Iraqi people... coalition forces will make every effort to spare innocent civilian from harm"(white house archives.2003). However, in the first year after invasion, it was revealed that Iraq had no WMD, nor was any relation between Saddam and Al-Qaeda and the Iraqi people emerged as the lonely losers, since the promises of democracy, safety and freedom turned to be a nightmare (Cramer &Thrall, 2012). chaos became the

order of the day and the country was further divided, engaging on a brutal civil war that resulted in the death of thousands of innocent civilians.

There have been a variety of books and scholarships that dealt with the impact of wars on children both at the physical and psychological level, for children are considered among the vulnerable segment of society and the major victims of war. For example, Joanna Santa Barbara talked about the psychological effect of war on children, she considered any war waged on any region in the world as being a war against children since they are the main victims of the war. Santa Barbara (1997) argued that war shaped the personalities of children, for exposure to violence, separation from the family and displacement affected the main stream of their life in the short and the long term. Barbara suggests to "provide children with the right environment that foster their health, self respect and dignity (Santa Barbara, 1997, p.168).

In a study entitled Violations of the Rights of Iraqi Children under the US Occupation and Ways to prosecute the Violators (2020), Ghribi & Ghribi provided an account for the violations of the American forces against Iraqi children amid the US occupation, considering these violations as a clear contradiction to human rights and international conventions. The writers studied these violations from a legal perspective, discussing ways to prosecute the violators according to the international law. (Ghribi & Ghribi, 2020).

Abdul Kareem Alobaidi was a leading Iraqi figure in the field of Educational Psychology and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, he wrote several articles about mental health in Iraq and he devoted a respected deal of his studies to talk about the mental health of Iraqi children .In his article, Iraqi children's rights: buiding a system under fire, (2009) Alobaidi et al enumerated a set of problems facing the development and the well being of Iraqi children and called for urgent intervention to end their misery .For him, "key features of positive intervention include the identification of the needs of children and adoption of locally and culturally sensitive measures for the care of Iraqi children"(2009,p.2).Alobaidi et al aimed at providing a critical study for Iraqi policy

makers to help them improve the health and the development of Iraqi children.

The period between 2003-2010, that followed the US led invasion, was considered as one of the bloodiest periods in Iraqi history. Sectarian conflict was to reach its high levels by the years 2006 and 2007 leading to the death of thousands of Iraqis and worsening the already existing situation. During that period, attention to mental health has been a law priority especially for children who are the most vulnerable segment of the Iraqi society. "Understanding the psychological impact of war on civilians is important because wars change a society's relationship with the future. War conditions create memories and wounds that outlive the wars themselves" (Behrouzan,2013).

The aim of this study is to provide a qualitative description on the suffering of Iraqi children by stating the problems that encountered the development and the mental well being of children, and in order to do so the main question that should be asked is the following: what are the major factors that contributed to mental health problems of Iraqi children amid US led invasion? To further explain our main question, the following sub-questions are asked:

- Why are children said to be the most sensitive segment effected by the war?
- How was the situation of Iraqi children's years before the US invasion?

In order to answer the above questions, this study is divided as follows: Part one seeks to explain why children are most vulnerable segment of society liable to be affected by violence and armed conflicts. Part two gives a background and history of the suffering of Iraqi children in the period between 1980-2003. Part three addresses the major psychological problems that hindered the development and the well being of Iraqi children.

## **2-Children and War: Endless Suffering**

Children are considered as sensitive segment of society who are in need for careful attention and supportive environment in order to be ready to participate in active way in building their future and their societies. Supportive environment means

providing the child with all the necessary needs that help in his upbringing like stable family life, social security, education and entertainment. Social security is by far an important element in raising healthy and normal child for without it, the presence of other elements becomes worthless. In discussing how war affects children, Santa Barbara argued:

War affects children in all the ways it affects adults, but also in different ways. First, children are dependent on the care, empathy, and attention of adults who love them. Their attachments are frequently disrupted in times of war, due to the loss of parents, extreme preoccupation of parents in protecting and finding subsistence for the family, and emotional unavailability of depressed or distracted parents... A certain proportion of war-affected children lose all adult protection- "unaccompanied children," as they are known in refugee situations. Second, impacts in childhood may adversely affect the life trajectory of children far more than adults. Consider children who lose the opportunity for education during war, children who are forced to move into refugee or displaced person camps, where they wait for years in miserable War circumstances for normal life to resume, if it ever does. Consider a child disabled in war; they may, in addition to loss of a limb, sight, or cognitive capacity, lose the opportunity of schooling and of a social life. (Santa Barbara, 2006, p. 892)

Children are excessively affected by armed conflict, and their needs merit concerted attention. Children, caught in the midst of critical stages of personal development, are affected by war more profoundly than adults. They depend, even more than adults, on the protection afforded in peacetime by family, society, and law. Wars can threaten to strip away these layers of protection, with adverse consequences for children's development and consequently for peace and stability for generations to come. There are many features to children's suffering in conflict situations. Children are maimed and killed, and uprooted from home and community. Children are made orphans, separated from their parents and subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation. Children are used as combatants, made to suffer from trauma and deprived of

education and healthcare.

### **3-The Situation of Iraqi Children before American Led Invasion**

The situation of Iraqi society was dominated by war and endless misery. The two decades that preceded the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, had seen the country engaged in a bloody war with Iran, which was followed by a devastating Gulf War of 1991 and a subsequent economic sanction that was imposed in the aftermath. All these events had a far-reaching impact on the country's economy and civilian population (Almashat,2015).

The Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, was the longest conventional war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lafta et al,2019). This war proved to be a bloody one, due to this conflict Iraq suffered a deep and devastating wounds. The enormous scale of social devastation was unprecedented, at least one million died and many other millions were left injured, orphaned and displaced. The Iran-Iraq war was followed by the Gulf War of 1990. The dispute over borders and oil prices between Iraq and Kuwait was not solved by diplomatic means, as a result Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait making it the nineteenth province of Iraq by August 1990. The following year, the UN resolution 687 was applied, requiring Iraq to destroy all of its weapons of mass destruction (Ismail & Ismail,2013).

Sanctions which were first designed to eradicate the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction turned themselves to be weapons of mass destruction (Bilgin,2001, p.65). Sanctions caused malnutrition suffering and the death of 500.000 Iraqi children. It led also to a deterioration and degradation of Iraqi educational system, health and industry (Al Samaraie,2007). During the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the USA, Iraq was denied the right to import equipment, medicine, educational items, health care requirements. "Children were considered as the most sensitive group of the Iraqi society hit by sanctions, as many of them were obliged to become bread winners with a corresponding drop out of some 20 to 30 percent. Many children grew up without the benefit of basic education or a strong family or extended family environment" (Halliday,

1999, p.32). All these had a negative impact on the social order and the well being of Iraqi children.

Iraqi education system also suffered due to sanctions, "the lack of basic child health care, the lack of school transportation, and often pitiful state of class rooms, not to mention the lack of books and other supplies contributed to a low attendance among students"(Halliday,1999, p. 34). Iraqi educational system deteriorated heavily by the years of the American embargo.

#### **4-Factors that Contributed to Mental Health Problems of Iraqi Children amid US Led Invasion**

In March 2003,US forces invaded Iraq, the declared aim was to destroy the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and end the dictatorial rule of the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein ."At this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world", declared president George Bush(White House archives,2003).American operation "Iraqi Freedom" turned to be a disaster for the Iraqi people ,with the high amount of destruction and civilian casualties Iraqi future under US occupation seemed to be unclear.

American occupation of Iraq put extra burden on the civilian population of the country. People were already exhausted by years of wars and sanctions as they became hopeless and mentally tired. Out of this suffering, Iraqi children appeared to be the major victim of this war. Under the American occupation, lack of security, sectarian violence, deterioration of health care systems, poverty, massive imprisonments, all contributed to grave violations to children's rights and their well being was at stake.

##### **4.1-Displacement**

Forced displacement can be defined as "forced movement of people from one geographical location to another. It occurs in different places because of different reasons that can be economic, political, religious and even in times of natural disasters" (United Nations, multilingual demographic dictionary1958, p 76). Since 2003 US led invasion of Iraq, millions of Iraqi people have been forced to leave their homes because

of "fear of sectarian violence, fear of coalition forces and fear of being kidnapped"(Ferris, 2008, p.1).

Years between 2005 to 2010 were characterized by an increasing political and sectarian conflict and a deterioration in living standards, this obliged many Iraqis to move either internally or externally, displacement in this period was described as being the biggest forced displacement in the Middle East history. (Toman, & kadhim, 2017). According to 2008 statistics there was about 2.7 million Iraqis displaced inside Iraq's borders and another 2 million living in neighboring countries like Syria, Lebanon and Jordan (Ferris, 2008). According to a report concerning internal displacement in Iraq, women represented 28 percent and children 48 percent of the total number of displaced people, many of those children are without care or members in families in which women are the lonely supporter (Riera, Harper, 2007). Sexual abuse, child soldiering, child labour, all of them were common among displaced children. "All of those displaced from their homes experience a sense of loss, despair and uncertainty about the future. Those displaced by conflict usually experience the loss of family members and friends and often find themselves separated from family members and far from traditional support mechanism". (Ferris, 2008, p.7)

#### **4.2- Imprisonment**

In times of conflict, children are frequently imprisoned. The reasons for this imprisonment are diverse, but in most cases, it results from the association of the children with the armed forces of a State. According to press accounts, US arrests of children allegedly involved in insurgent activities arose from an average of 25 per month to 100 per month in 2007, with over 500 children held camp cropper by mid September. In August, US opened Dar Alhikma, intended to provide 600 detainees between 11-17 with education services, however, children would remain subjected to the same detention review process like adult which did not guarantee detainees access to lawyers when presenting cases (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

The British news Al-quds Al-arabi reported in February 2006 that the Iraqi

Minister of Human Rights admitted that there were 1070 children under the age of 16 years in the prisons that revealed to be involved in systematic torture. Information also revealed children and women were detainees in the famous Iraqi prison Abu Gharib. "The Pentagon itself did not deny the detention of children and women but denied abuse of children in prison" (Ismail, 2007, p353-354).

#### **4.3-Child Labor**

The US invasion of 2003, left behind it a destroyed nation, destroyed economy and created unsecure society, it also deepened unemployment and poverty in Iraq and obliged many children to go to streets to work and support their families. "It was estimated that by the late 2004 nearly 1300.000 children between the age of eight and sixteen were working;27 percent of children worked over eight hours,9 percent were injured and 58 percent suffered from violence which arose from the need to work "(Ismail,2007, p.348). There were no laws that protect child labor.

Big responsibility, little pay, difficult job and more work than the child can handle, are factors that may cause health and psychological problems for the working child. There are signs of psychological problems affecting the children who are working in hazardous work more than those who are not working or work in the light work. Those children become more aggressive as the physical and psychological abuse they go through will result in poor psychological and social harmony with non-working children and with people in general. Moreover, those working children will always be complaining as a result of their sense of social oppression inflicted upon them and the lack of sense of social justice, between them and other non working children. (Al-Taee,2011, p.61).

Decades of wars and armed conflicts in Iraq left many orphans and widows and obliged many children to go to streets to search for work in order to support their families. Poverty, displacement and the spread of violence were main reasons of child labor in Iraq. Nearly 25 percent of the Iraqi population lived under poverty line(UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2005). beside poverty, there was

a strong culture of child labor in Iraq. Despite the fact that education in Iraq is free in schools and universities, families did not allow their children to attend schools, believing that work is more important than education (2005).

#### **4.4- child soldiering**

A child soldier is defined as "any person less than eighteen years old who is a member of armed governmental forces or of a regular or irregular armed group or associated with these forces, whether or not there is an armed conflict" (Olivia Garreau,2012). Child soldiering is a worldwide issue that is not limited to one country or region and it is present in hot area of armed conflict like Africa, the Middle East and even in Latin America. There are different reasons for the recruitment of children such as their limited ability to assess risks, less costly than adults and organized armies, added to the fact that poverty, starvation and unemployment pushed children to choose to be fighters (Schauer & Albert ,2010, p.311).

In Iraq, the phenomenon of child soldiering is not new but dated back to the time of Baath regime led by Saddam Hussein. Saddam established what was called "Ashbal Saddam" (Saddam Lion's Cubs), which was composed from boys between the ages of 10-15.This group was formed after the first Gulf War (1991), it was estimated that there were more than 8000 young Iraqis serving in this group (Singer,2016).

By the time of US led-invasion, child soldiering continued to exist in Iraq, this time children did not serve only among Iraqi official army but also among Shia and Suna military groups especially in years between 2005-2007 when sectarian violence intensified in the country. American military forces engaged in fighting with child soldiers in different Iraqi cities like Nasariya, Karbala and Kirkuk. American and British forces reported that they had captured hundreds of Iraqi juveniles in several battles (singer,2016).

The experience of being a child soldier was a tough one for the Iraqi children, they were deprived from their basic rights and instead of enjoying their childhood, they became accustomed to the images of blood and destruction everywhere. Armed groups

and militias realized the need for such images in preparing future fighters. In 2007, an armed group killed two teachers in front of their pupils in two Iraqi schools in Baghdad (Mohamed, 2017). These difficult circumstances created a lost a hopeless generation ready to commit the worst crimes, in this regard Federica D'Alessandra discussed the psychological consequences for being a child soldier:

Among war-affected children, child soldiers are more likely to endure harsher psychological consequences, such as PTSD, major depression, hostility, sadness, self-confidence and inability to cope with daily life. While anxiety appears to be a generalized response to violence from children, psychosocial distress is predicted by the level of violence exposure and not by 'child soldier' status alone, following a dose-response tendency. Being a child soldier, nevertheless, exponentially increases the odds of being coerced into witnessing or perpetrating violence or undergoing other traumatic experiences. Children who have directly engaged in combat, who have been forced to engage in crime and gratuitous violence, have been subjected to sexual violence, witnessed or undergone torture, or otherwise lost a family member of social status within the community of belonging as a result of their conscription, reported the highest scores of psychological distresses (D'alessandra, 2014, p.15).

In the absence of governmental control and a well-organized policy to deal the suffering of Iraqi children and their psychological problems resulting from the war, armed groups succeeded in providing a negative psychological rehabilitation for thousands of adolescents and orphans who lost hope in life and became more addicted to violence

#### **4.5-Education**

The evolution of Iraqi education system can be divided into two periods, a period that preceded the US led invasion and another period that started immediately after the US occupation of the country. Education system in Iraq by 1970's and 1980's was one of the best systems in the region, Iraq had a well established educational system with high literacy and enrolment rates( Rawaf et al,2014) .In March 2003, the UNESCO

described The Education system in Iraq, prior to 1991, "as one of the best in the region, with over 100% Gross Enrolment Rate for primary schooling and high levels of literacy, both of men and women. The Higher Education, especially the scientific and technological institutions, were of an international standard, staffed by high quality personnel" (UNESCO fact sheet). However, the system deteriorated after the Gulf War and the subsequent economic sanctions that was imposed in the after math of this war. In the years of sanctions, the Iraqi people were economically exhausted, this pushed many Iraqi families to stop sending their children to schools in order to work and beg in the streets. The result was a high level of school dropout in primary school (Hassoun,2015).

A further down fall occurred by the time of US led invasion of 2003.Children's right to receive education was violated by the American occupation, the security situation was critical, educational facilities was targeted and Iraqi academics were killed (Hassoun,2015). Many schools and universities were destroyed. The report by Felice Bennis and the Iraq Working Group at the Institute for Policy Studies and the Center for Foreign Policy highlighted the focus on 24 June 2004 that more than 300 schools were destroyed in the war and that other schools were looted in the chaos that followed the US occupation of Iraq (Jabbar& Jabbar,2019).

Both of the American forces and the Iraqi police units occupied school buildings( Al-douri,2003) and the deteriorated security situation prevented many students from attending schools, sometimes, the school year ended before completing the curriculum.(Hoffman,2006).it was reported that "one of six children had a textbook, school facilities were in poor condition, shortage of supplies and equipment were endemic ,the quality of education was in serious decline"( Ranjan&Jain,2009).

Decades of conflict and under- investment in Iraq have destroyed what used to be the best education system in the region and severely curtailed Iraqi children's access to quality learning.

**Conclusion:**

No one can deny the fact that children in Iraq are living a deprived childhood. For more than forty years, they have been living under fire, they are deprived from their economic, social, educational and psychological needs. This situation impacted the behavior and the future of Iraqi children. Being deprived from fatherhood, motherhood, from food and education led to a significant psychological harm and behavioral changes.

The children of Iraq have been major victims of the American occupation as they had to face the American excessive use of power, raids, destruction of infrastructure, the burning and looting of civil services and the damage of health care centers. The Iraqi children experienced all the types of abuse, they were brutalized, raped, imprisoned and tortured. Most children have experienced trauma but few receive the care and support they need to help them cope with so much chaos, anxiety and loss.

Serious measures should be taken in order to protect children of Iraq. The Iraqi government and Iraqi policy makers are asked to provide children with all means that grant them their livelihood and well being, because today's children are the future leaders who would develop and create a better Iraq.

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