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a heavy price for children

VIOLENCE DESTROYS CHILDHOODS IN IRAQ

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Amira, 5-years old, fled with her family from fighting in Baiji, Iraq, on a terrifying journey across Syria and Turkey before returning to the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

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WE BROUGHT ONE BOTTLE OF WATER

BUT MY BROTHER WAS SO TIRED THAT HE DROPPED IT.”



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Boys play outside the settlement where the Wasam family live in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The neighbourhood of unfinished houses is now home to thousands of families who have fled violence across Iraq.

The Wasam family* was forced to make a terrifying journey across Iraq, Syria and Turkey to flee heavy bombing and fighting in Baiji, which had destroyed homes and devastated lives in the area.

The family of seven was stranded in southern Mosul, as Salwa, the mother, was about to give birth to her sixth child, one month premature. They lived in fear for almost three months, with little medical care for their newborn.

With no birth certificate or papers for the baby, the family paid a smuggler to take them by car across Syria towards the western border with Turkey. They feared being caught by armed groups on the road. Finally, after walking for seven hours through the night, they crossed the border to Antakya in southern Turkey.

“I was so scared when the man told us to start walking,” says Muna (11). “It was a very long journey and my shoes fell apart. I was so thirsty. We brought one bottle of water but my brother was so tired that he dropped it. We walked for a long time and we crossed a lot of mountains, across very thin paths and the valley just below us. I never want to repeat that journey.”

Salwa collapsed and had to be pulled to her feet by her eldest son, Fadil. He later lost his way in the dark and was separated from his family for several hours.

After a few months in Turkey, the family obtained papers to re-enter the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. They temporarily settled in a half-built house in Erbil, with unreliable water supply and no furniture. The children have returned to school after missing over a year of education.

**All names have changed*

Conflict and violence in Iraq

A heavy price for children

Iraq is now one of the most dangerous places in the world for children.

Four decades of conflict, sanctions, violence, insecurity and economic stagnation have brought development in the country to its knees.

At the end of 2015, Iraq had missed all, bar one, of its eight Millennium Development Goals including targets for increasing school enrolment, reducing child deaths before their fifth birthday and improving access to safe drinking water.

The intensification of conflict since 2014 has had a catastrophic impact on children in the country. UNICEF estimates that 4.7 million children across Iraq are in need of assistance - that's around one-third of all children in the country. Since the war began in Syria in 2011, Iraq has also been hosting more than 245,000 Syrian refugees, nearly a quarter of whom are children. Almost two thirds of Iraqi children in need are in areas beyond the control of the Government of Iraq.

Multiple armed factions are waging war throughout the country, putting people of every ethnicity and background in danger - killing and injuring thousands, trapping civilians in cities under siege and forcing families to flee their homes.

Massive movements of people who have been forced from their homes by fighting - many from areas cut off from aid like Fallujah - characterise the ongoing crisis. Almost ten per cent of the country's children - more than 1.5 million - have been forced to flee their homes due to violence since the beginning of 2014, often moving multiple times to seek safety.

Protecting children in danger

According to UNICEF, 3.6 million children - one in five of all Iraqi children - are at a great risk of death, injury, sexual violence, recruitment into the fighting and abduction. This number has increased by 1.3 million in just 18 months.

Since 2014, UNICEF has verified 838 child deaths, and 794 injuries in Iraq. The actual number is likely to be much higher. In the last year alone, 455 incidents affected more than 1,200 children.¹ The large increase in the number of violations against children is largely due to the intensification of violence in the Anbar area, in the west of the country. From the first to the second half of 2015, the number of child victims of grave violations in Iraq shot up by more than five times, from 202 children in the period between January to June, to 1,020 between July and December.

The reported abduction of thousands of children, particularly in 2014, is one of Iraq's greatest concerns. Since the beginning of 2014, UNICEF has verified the abduction of 1,496 children in Iraq. On average, 50 children per month. Abducted girls are most at risk of sexual abuse, particularly those from religious and ethnic communities. The use of sexual violence and the brutalization of women and girls, has been well documented, with many abducted on a mass scale, held captive for months, sold into sexual slavery and subjected to rape, torture and

abuse.^{2,3}

Boys are often forced into supporting front line activities in the conflict, including as combatants or suicide bombers. Since 2014, the UN has verified 124 cases of children recruited into the fighting in Iraq. The actual number is likely to be much higher.⁴

Mines and explosive devices are ongoing hazards, killing and injuring children across Iraq. Warring parties have left improvised explosives in Diyala, Salahadin, Nienewah, Anbar, Baghdad and other governorates, often with the obvious intent of hitting children and civilians.

Many of the improvised bombs are often positioned in places frequently used by civilians, or along roads in public spaces and in areas where children play. In Diyala, east of Baghdad, Iraqi security forces disarmed at least 18 explosives hidden in dolls along a route used by displaced families. A resident who returned to his home after the government had retaken the city, reported finding 43 explosive devices in his house.⁵

The UN was able to verify 60 incidents involving the use of mines, other remnants of war, or IEDs across Iraq in 2015 and 2016 that have killed or injured children. Children who survive explosions are left with disabilities and require specialized medical care that their families, already vulnerable from the conflict, cannot afford.

The border area with Iran in Diyala, Wassit and Missan governorates is also littered with mines dating from the Iran-Iraq war. According to the Iraqi Directorate of Mines, since 2012 hundreds of children have been injured in these areas by unexploded ordnance and explosive remnants of war



Firas Ali Muhammed (17), lost part of his right leg in the suicide bombing of Al-Shuhadaa Stadium in the city of Iskandariya, Babil Governorate on 25 March 2016. In total, 43 people were reportedly killed and at least 58 boys were injured. Of those who died, 23 were boys younger than 17. Firas has three brothers and five sisters. "I am a huge fan of football but I don't know what my future holds after I lost my leg."

1 Report of The Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, June 2015 and May 2016

2 UNAMI/OHCHR Report the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 11 September – 10 December 2014.

3 Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups, March 2015.

4 Ibid

5 Interview with resident.





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Going out to buy bread was all it took to kill Ahmed and Saba's sister in 2010. While walking to a local shop in Ramadi with her father, she was caught in a car bomb. A life over after just five years. Her father was seriously injured and can no longer work or provide for his family.

In 2015, the family fled conflict in Ramadi, first to Baghdad, where they lived in a mosque for three months before travelling to Erbil. They now live in a camp on the outskirts of the city.

Ahmed and Saba were out of school for three years, but now attend the UNICEF-supported school in the camp.

"We were planning to go back to Ramadi, but we heard that the situation was not good and there is no water or electricity," says Suha, the children's mother. "We also heard that our house was bombed, so we changed our minds."

Childhood under assault

The psychological impact of the violence on children is devastating and has a lifelong impact. Children who have been forced to flee their homes due to violence often exhibit behaviour changes as a result of their experiences. According to an assessment in the Kurdistan region, behaviour changes were reported in 76 per cent of children. The most common behaviour pattern cited for girls was unusual crying and screaming, with 66 per cent saying their children were affected. This was followed by sadness, nightmares, antisocial behaviour and aggressive behaviour. Among boys, unusual crying and screaming was also most commonly cited, followed by sadness and violence against younger children.

"The glass doors in my house shattered in the bombings. I don't like airplanes. They are loud and they make me scared. I think about it now and I cry a lot. Sometimes I can't sleep. I want to stay beside my dad." Wafiyah (10) displaced from Baiji.

In the chaos of multiple displacement and forced movement, many children are separated from their families. In 2015, UNICEF and its partners identified and provided family tracing and reunification or alternative care services to 527 unaccompanied and separated children.

Violence and loss of income are forcing more families to send their children to work or marry their daughters early. Currently, around 975,000 girls in Iraq got married before the age of 15, twice as many as in 1990. More than 575,000 children are estimated to be working, double the number in 1990.⁶



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Shoes left behind by victims of a suicide bombing at Al-Shuhadaa Stadium in the city of Iskandariya, Babil Governorate on March 25, 2016.

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A young boy at the Al-Shuhadaa Stadium in the city of Iskandariya, Babil Governorate. A few months earlier, 43 people died and more than 100 were injured in a suicide bombing at a football match, the majority of victims were younger than 17.

⁶ UNICEF Iraq programme monitoring data.



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Muhammed, 17, was injured and his brother Muhaned, 10, was killed in the suicide bombing of a football match at Al-Shuhadaa Stadium in the city of Iskandariya, Babil Governorate.

Healthcare in jeopardy

All areas of the country affected by conflict have had health services severely disrupted, with facilities damaged, staff driven out and a widespread lack of medicines, vaccines and medical supplies. Across Iraq in the past two years, the UN verified over 50 attacks on medical facilities and personnel.

Mass movements of people fleeing violence have placed a huge strain on health services. Some hospitals and primary health care services reported a 50 per cent increase in case-loads, while health professionals often run for their lives, leaving services understaffed. The stress is leading to a heightened risk of disease and the inability to provide adequate medical services. In Ninewa, for instance, the Department of Health has reported an increased incidence of hepatitis, measles and pneumonia.

One out of every 25 children in Iraq dies before reaching their fifth birthday. The country had made significant strides in cutting its under-five mortality rate since 1980. However, the gains began to slow significantly from 1990 onwards. Acute respiratory infections are the number one cause of death among Iraqi children under five. Waterborne diseases like cholera, typhoid, hepatitis and diarrhoea are some of the other significant threats facing children.

Almost one quarter of children in Iraq (23 per cent) are stunted - meaning their development and growth has been limited, largely due to under nutrition, poor maternal health and disease. About 10 per cent of these children are moderately or severely stunted⁷. One contributory factor in Iraq is the extremely low rate of exclusive breastfeeding. It stands at 19.6 per cent, with most infants receiving additional milk and other liquids from the beginning of life. In addition, a recent food security survey of internally displaced people established that 22 per cent of households are not able to meet their basic needs. Almost three quarters of people (74 per cent) cited a shortage of food.⁸

In 2016, more than 1.1 million babies will be born across Iraq, with more than one quarter arriving in the world with no medical care.⁹ The provision of emergency obstetric and newborn services has been badly affected in conflict-affected areas. Neonatal deaths account for 56 per cent of deaths of children under five years of age, and slightly more than half of these occur within the first 24 hours of life.¹⁰

Low immunization coverage is a major concern, with conflict and insecurity leading to patchy coverage. A measles outbreak in 2013 migrated and spread from the north to the south of the country, with 1,427 confirmed cases in 2015. Polio continues to be a risk. A vaccination programme was implemented after the polio outbreak in Syria spread to Iraq in 2014, paralysing two children in areas around Baghdad. A rapid response stopped the outbreak in the Middle East despite the widespread conflict. UNICEF, WHO and partners have reached more than 5.6 million children with polio vaccination and nearly 4 million immunised against measles.



⁷ UNICEF Iraq programme monitoring data.

⁸ REACH, Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment of Internally Displaced Persons Residing in Host Communities, Iraq, 2015

⁹ Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 4 (MICS 4), 2011

¹⁰ Ibid

Running dry

About 1 million Iraqi children under the age of ten who have fled their homes face an acute shortage of safe water. The effects of climate change are already ravaging Iraq's water supply – decreasing annual flow rates, and increasing salinity in the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. However, conflict is greatly exacerbating the crisis. Parties to the conflict have used water as a weapon of war and the violence has damaged and destroyed water systems.

Outside of cities, 1 in 4 children have to meet their daily water needs from rivers and creeks, while only 1 in 10 have access to drinking water from tankers or open wells. Even where water treatment facilities are in place, up to half of the water produced is lost due to seepage, leakages and waste as a result of system inefficiencies and domestic use.

Parties to the conflict have destroyed and limited water supplies to civilian populations. Armed groups have flooded areas and cut off water supplies to force communities to abandon their homes. However, the greatest threat to the country's water supply comes as a result of decades of conflict, sanctions and neglect of infrastructure that have undermined Iraq's water resources management system as a whole.

Iraqi children have seen a dramatic cut in their access to safe drinking water. Proper maintenance of water infrastructure – most famously that of the Mosul Dam – is exceptionally difficult amid extreme insecurity. Chlorine supplies are also running low. Although 94.2 per cent of households have access to municipal water services, only 52.9 per cent are using this source for drinking water. More than three quarters of people surveyed believe the water is not chlorinated. Due to a lack of repairs, leakages and aging water infrastructure, more than 40 per cent of treated water is lost in the system before it ever reaches people who need it.¹¹

The situation in areas beyond the control of the Government of Iraq is critical. In Mosul, for example, no chlorine has been supplied to the city since June 2014.

The financial crisis in Iraq sparked by falling oil prices and the economic impact of conflict, has reduced electrical supply from 15 hours per day to less than six hours.¹² Shortages of fuel have badly affected water pumping and treatment systems across the country, which increases the risk of water borne diseases, especially cholera.

About 70 per cent of children in Iraq do not have access to public sewage services.¹³ Leakages in the sewage piping system and domestic septic tanks also often contaminate the drinking water network. Every day at least 1 million tons of raw sewage is pumped into the Tigris River in Baghdad Governorate threatening the entire water distribution system.¹⁴

11 UNICEF pilot project conducted in Baghdad Erbil and Najaf governorates, 2016

12 Al-Jazeera, The man bringing electricity to Iraq, June 2016

13 UNICEF Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices survey, 2015

14 Report of the Baghdad Mayor's Office, March 2016



Struggling to learn

Iraq was once a regional cultural and educational hub, historically known as a global centre of learning. Today, education in Iraq is in a desperate state.

On-going conflict has worsened the situation of children and adolescents across the entire education spectrum. UNICEF estimates that nearly 3.5 million school-aged children are unable to access school or any form of education.

About 1 million school-aged children are internally displaced. They have fled their homes and settled temporarily in other areas of the country, but in the process up to 70 per cent have lost an entire year of school. In addition, approximately 64,000 Syrian refugee children in Iraq have also had their education disrupted.¹⁵

Teachers too are in short supply. About 13,466 Ministry of Education staff from the Kurdistan Region have been displaced since the conflict intensified in 2014. In addition, 457 staff members from other locations were displaced.

In classes that are running, there is a very high pupil to teacher ratio. For example, in camps in Dohuk, class sizes range from 35 to 60 children- and schools often operate two or three shifts a day to cope with increased numbers, significantly reducing the amount of time children have to learn.

Education under attack

Nearly one in five schools is out of use due to conflict.¹⁶ Since 2014, the UN has verified 135 attacks on educational facilities and personnel¹⁷, while 797 schools have been taken over as shelters for internally displaced people.¹⁸ Even when people were able to find alternative safe places to stay, schools needed repairs and rehabilitation before children could resume their studies. Schools have been used for military purposes as temporary bases and positions. This can result in attacks on what should be safe places for children to play and learn. Attacks on schools have a long-term impact on children's educational prospects. Rebuilding takes time and requires a significant financial investment.

¹⁵ UNHCR statistics of the number of Syrian refugees in Iraq

¹⁶ UNICEF Iraq Education statistics, 2016

¹⁷ Report of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict. June 2015 and May 2016

¹⁸ UNICEF Iraq Education statistics, 2016



UNICEF's Response



Emergency Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM)

The Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) is designed to get immediate aid to children and their families who have been forced to flee their homes. UNICEF and WFP, in partnership with UNFPA and several NGOs, lead the RRM in Iraq. As soon as people are reported as being displaced, partners trigger the mechanism so that emergency assistance is delivered to people in need within 72 hours.

Since the beginning of 2016, UNICEF and partners have distributed 96,619 kits across Iraq reaching nearly 600,000 people. Since the mechanism was activated in June 2014, over 5 million people have been reached.

Each kit supports a family of seven people for approximately one week with:

- 18 litres of bottled drinking water.
- One container for safe water handling.
- One hygiene kit that includes soap, sanitary napkins, hand sanitizer, a scarf, detergents, and baby diapers.
- 12 kilogram ready-to-eat dried food rations from WFP.
- UNFPA contributes dignity kits to women and girls of reproductive age with sanitary pads, and underclothes.



Child protection

From January 2015 through May 2016, UNICEF with partners provided:

- Psychosocial support to 70,278 newly registered internally displaced and 32,072 refugee children.
- 8,899 internally displaced and 5,818 refugee children received specialized assistance from front-line workers. Cases included children with emotional distress, those out of school, working children, early marriage, gender based violence, or with health problems and disabilities.
- 1,215 displaced and refugee unaccompanied and separated children were helped with family tracing and reunification or alternative care services.
- 1,204 Syrian refugee and displaced children who were in conflict with the law received legal and social assistance while they were held in pre-trial detention and during trials.



Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

UNICEF has provided the following services in 2016:

- 832,000 people were supplied with water, sanitation and hygiene services, focusing on the most vulnerable children and families, including in hard-to-reach locations. UNICEF provides technical support to develop standards and policies for nationwide water, sanitation and solid waste services.
- UNICEF and partners developed a new programme to better mitigate the impact of drought and water use across the country. This included guidance for government ministries on the management and monitoring of water use.
- UNICEF worked with the government and local authorities to set up local emergency cells responsible for monitoring water quality and developing preparedness plans for crises, such as the cholera outbreak and other water related diseases, as well as drought, flooding and seasonal disasters.



Education

From January 2015 through May 2016, UNICEF and partners worked to help get children back in school across Iraq:

- An estimated 710,484 children were able to access education and learn in safe and protected environments. This includes 298,904 IDP children, 28,919 Syrian refugee children and 383,161 children living in host-communities. Of these numbers, an estimated 124,000 were out of school.
- 45 schools were constructed, each containing 13 classrooms with full water and sanitation facilities as well as teachers' and head teachers' offices.
- 172 pre-fabricated classroom structures have been provided as annexes to existing school buildings to increase the capacity of schools to take in more children.
- More than 1,585 temporary learning spaces were installed in displaced persons and refugee camps.
- UNICEF rehabilitated and repaired 405 schools where displaced families had taken refuge, providing a safe learning space for 384,521 children.
- UNICEF distributed teaching and learning materials in schools for about 284,976 displaced children, 25,563 Syrian refugee children and over 300,000 host-community children.
- To improve the quality of education, UNICEF provided training for more than 2,775 education personnel, including officials of the Directorates of Education, supervisors, school principals, teachers and parent teacher associations.
- UNICEF procured teaching and learning materials, which were distributed to about 310,000 displaced and refugee children.



Health

From January 2015 through May 2016, UNICEF and partners supported the following health initiatives:

- Nationwide communication and social mobilization efforts for the oral cholera vaccination and polio campaigns over the past two years.
- UNICEF supported the Ministry of Health and the Directorates of Health to enhance routine immunisations for Syrian refugees and IDPs, along with strengthening health systems in under-served communities
- UNICEF continues to procure and distribute cold chain equipment, as well as polio and measles vaccines.
- UNICEF supports the baby-hut initiative that provides breastfeeding counselling to pregnant and lactating women. By training volunteers among the Syrian refugee population, the initiative also helps mothers to better monitor the growth and development of their babies.



Bringing the focus back on Iraq's future generation

The conflict in Iraq is devastating the lives of children and destroying their futures. As violence continues to escalate and spread, the large number of children needing assistance will continue to increase.

Iraq's water infrastructure, health care systems and educational services are deteriorating and have in parts collapsed. Children have limited access to safe water and diarrhoea is common; they are not getting immunized, leaving them exposed to the threat of disease; and school shifts mean that children might receive less than 20 hours of teaching a week.

If the basic needs of families are to be met, and their dignity maintained, immediate lifesaving assistance has to be scaled up. At the same time, it is critical to improve the provision of health, water and education services to all people across the country to reduce the risk of the humanitarian crisis expanding still further.

The conflict is exposing children in Iraq to daily horrors. Unless addressed immediately, young minds, haunted by fear and hatred, could slip into a spiral of despair, darkness and a sense of helplessness. Learning, playing and aspiring to a more prosperous future will be a thing of the past.

The consequences of inaction today will be felt for years to come. Today's children of Iraq are the country's future teachers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, labourers, farmers, scientists and technicians. A failure to protect and nurture these children now will result in social and economic costs down the road that will threaten the future of the country.

By undertaking the measures below, these threats to the children of Iraq can be reduced.

- All parties to the conflict in Iraq have an obligation to respect international humanitarian law, including immediately ending the killing, maiming, abduction, torture, detention, sexual violence and recruitment of children. Attacks on schools and medical facilities and personnel must stop.
- Provide unhindered and unconditional humanitarian access to all children wherever they are in the country, including areas not under control of the government. In areas with ongoing conflict, civilians wishing to leave must be given safe passage and received in a protected place where services can meet their needs.
- Expand and improve education services for children who are out of school, including through catch up classes for those who have missed up to two years. Increasing access to learning spaces and equipping teachers and children with educational materials and training is vital. These are the future citizens who will rebuild Iraq when peace returns.
- To recover from the horrors of war and displacement, children need sustained support. This means providing programmes that will allow children to heal and reconnect with their childhood. Emphasising values of reconciliation, tolerance, acceptance of the other, social progress and prosperity will ultimately help the nation to move out of this crisis.
- As the conflict continues, with no end in sight, the number of children who need assistance increases. Funding is running short, already leading to cut backs in life-saving humanitarian responses for children. UNICEF still requires US \$100 million for its programmes in Iraq for 2016.



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70 YEARS FOR EVERY CHILD

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Saba and her mother Suuha wait to get cards for food donations in Baharka Camp.