FORGOTTEN LIVES : ADDRESSING ORPHANHOOD IN IRAQ

Soleen Soran | November 20, 2024

Executive Summary

Iraq is a country with an estimated 5 million orphans. Factors leading to orphanhood include war and political conflict, natural disasters, diseases, poverty, and abandonment. Iraq's orphan population has grown dramatically due to decades of instability and violence. The orphanage system in Iraq is overwhelmed and unable to adequately care for all orphaned children, limiting the ability to foster healthy, productive generations. Orphanages lack the warmth of a family environment and can't provide the personal connections that are crucial for child development. Iraq's legal framework prohibits formal adoption, allowing only guardianship within extended family. This restricts opportunities for orphans to find stable, long-term homes. Orphans face significant health, psychological, social, security, and educational challenges. Many of them lack identification documents, preventing them from accessing basic services like schooling. While some local initiatives have found success, more comprehensive solutions are needed to support Iraq's growing orphan population. Recommendations include expanding foster care, improving orphanage conditions, reforming adoption laws, and providing more resources and legal protections for vulnerable children. Addressing these issues is essential to ensuring the well-being of future generations and fostering a more stable, safe, and resilient society in Iraq.

Introduction

Children are the most affected group in countries where natural disasters, poverty, diseases, and wars take place. War and conflict violate all the human rights of a child, namely, their right to live, to be with their family, to be loved, to be safe, and to develop themselves in a nurturing, safe environment. The term "orphan" is used to describe children who lose one or both of their parents before reaching the age of 18.[1]

Children who are orphaned face many difficulties affecting their wellbeing; physical and mental health. As well as lack of monetary resources and loss of protection from forms of abuse such as extortion, neglect, and oppression.

According to the United Nations (UN), 6.5% of the world's 2.2 billion children are orphans. Over 300,000 children have been forced into becoming child soldiers, and more than 218 million children are engaged in labor, with most working under unsafe conditions.[2]

In 2021 the Iraqi Commission for Human Rights confirmed that there are five million orphans in Iraq and that 45,000 of them are without identification documents, with only 22 governmental shelters provided for them. While there are 345 non-governmental organizations to help orphans, the police have reported that most of said organizations take advantage of the children instead of helping them.[3]

With the upcoming census on the 20th and 21st of November 2024 in Iraq, there is hope that it will provide more accurate and up-to-date data about the number of orphans and their locations. Such data is crucial for understanding the scale of the issue and identifying where resources and support are most needed.

Despite the dire situation, the Iraqi legal framework, influenced by both religious and cultural factors, remains ill-equipped to provide adequate solutions for these orphaned children.

To address the systemic failures in Iraq's orphan care system, we will explore the challenges posed by the absence of a formal adoption process, the limitations of the adoption system, and the vulnerability of children to abandonment and trafficking. We will further investigate successful local initiatives, such as foster homes and private care efforts, and propose legal reforms that could enhance the welfare of orphans. By drawing on case studies, offering practical recommendations to improve the conditions of Iraq's orphans, ensuring their right to safety, care, and inclusion in society.

Credit : World Orphans

Factors That Lead to Orphanhood

<u>1. War and Conflict</u>

War and conflict are among the leading factors contributing to children becoming orphans, as they often result in the death or disappearance of one or both parents. Every day, 10,000 children become orphans in ongoing war zones, that is 3.5 million a year.[4]

In conflict zones, civilian areas are often affected, putting families directly in harm's way and resulting in casualties that tragically leave children parentless. Additionally, displacement caused by conflict forces families to flee their homes, leading to separation where children may lose contact with their parents entirely. In some cases, parents may be detained, imprisoned, or recruited into armed groups, rendering them unable to care for their children.

2.Natural causes

Traffic accidents, murders, industrial accidents and other similar reasons are different factors that cause orphanhood.

Natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, tsunami and drought cause major traumatic consequences in societies. These natural disasters that cause mass death tolls and material damages also cause children to become orphan or having to live alone. The impact is particularly severe in Asian and African countries where infrastructure is not developed or even lacking, amplifying the disaster.

For instance, in 2004, after a devastating tsunami hit Aceh, a Province of Indonesia, 129,775 people died, 38,786 people went missing and 504,518 people were displaced because of the tsunami. This led to the orphanhood of approximately 37,000 children.[5]

3.Diseases

Millions of people are living in epidemics or live with a deadly chronic disease, many of whom lose their lives due to insufficient medical care. A lot of people in the rural areas of Iraq have limited access to advanced medical facilities, making them vulnerable to preventable fatalities from treatable illnesses. One of the main reasons that leave children without a mother is maternal mortality, which is at high rate in Iraq. This can be because of complications during childbirth or pregnancy. In 2020, 900 women in Iraq lost their lives due to maternal health complications.[6] Globally, nearly 95% of maternal deaths occurred in low- and lower-middle-income countries, with most of these deaths being preventable.[7]

4.Poverty

Poverty is a significant factor leading to orphanhood, as many lives are lost to poverty-related causes, and countless parents are forced to abandon their children due to financial hardship. This leaves a large number of children without parental care and support.

In Iraq, approximately 25% of the population—around 10.75 million people—live below the poverty line, according to the Ministry of Planning.[8] Poverty contributes to orphanhood in various ways, including limited access to healthcare, which raises mortality rates, and economic desperation, which sometimes compels parents to give up their children in hopes of giving them a chance at a better life. Addressing poverty is essential to reducing orphanhood rates and improving the lives of vulnerable children.[9]

5.Abandonment

The number of families and single parents who give away their children to humanitarian organizations or just abandon them on the streets is alarmingly high. This can be due to reasons such as being born out of wedlock, divorce, remarrying, financial problems, social pressures and more.

The number of children born out of wedlock has increased significantly in the last 20-30 years. These children are living away from a family environment with disadvantages that orphans face even though their parents are alive.

Credit:Foreign Relations Bureau – Iraq

Adoption Laws

Children need a family to have their basic needs met, such as love, security, and a sense of belonging. Yet, adoption, as recognized in Western legal systems, is prohibited under Iraqi law, and the only available option is guardianship which aligns with Islamic Sharia law.[10] This system, however, restricts the child's status and does not allow for full legal inclusion into the adoptive family, making it difficult for many orphans to find stable, long-term homes. The guardianship is only granted to extended family or friends of the parents of the orphaned child, therefore not allowing any international adoptions.[11]

Shekh Ahmed Al-Hasnawi, a respected expert in the Islamic laws, explained "Islam has given ample space to adopt children, whether the child has lost both parents or one of them, provided that the approval of the guardian who follows the parents is obtained. If the guardian is not available to the child, his approval is obtained for him to live within a family that is willing and able to raise the child well and spend on him like the children of that family without discrimination, but at the same time without attributing the child to whoever adopts him."[12]

Social researcher Akram Abdel Latif highlights the increasing social phenomenon of child abandonment, where some families, unable to bear the responsibility of raising a child, resort to leaving them in hospitals or even public spaces. These children are at risk of trafficking and exploitation. Conversely, many childless families, unable to conceive through medical means, are eager to provide homes for orphans, but legal and cultural barriers make this nearly impossible.[13]

Judge Haider Jalil Al-Birawi, head of the Baghdad Juvenile Court, points out that according to juvenile care law 76 of 1983, any form of adoption and guardianship outside of the family is allowed only for orphans of unknown lineage, meaning all their known family members are dead, further narrowing the pool of children eligible for adoption or guardianship. Unbeknown to the government officials, the number of children abandoned by their parents

and extended family would be much higher than those with unknown lineage. Additionally, Iraq's legal framework does not permit guardianship for families of differing religious sects, severely limiting opportunities for orphaned children from minority groups. Currently in Baghdad there are only five orphanages, which means about 250 children are benefiting from these homes all together.

Criminals may take advantage of the fact that there is demand for adopting children but no supply because of the strict laws. For example, in Tunisia, another country following the Islamic laws of adoption, a woman was charged with human trafficking after registering her infants under a different family's name and selling them to said families who were desperate to have children of their own. She is now facing a 15-year prison sentence for her actions. Such cases highlight the urgent need for reform in adoption processes to prevent exploitation and ensure the welfare of vulnerable children.[14]

After decades of war and conflict, Iraq has produced a generation of orphans without the support they truly need from the existing legal system. It is necessary to re-examine and improve the current legal process of adoption. Clearer regulations are needed to define who qualifies for adoption, who is eligible to adopt, and how the adoption process should be carried out. Additionally, firm government monitoring must be established to ensure the safety and well-being of the child being placed into adopting families.

Credit:UNICEF

The Current State of Orphanages

Building orphanages is currently the most common approach to addressing the growing number of orphans in Iraq, as adoption remains unutilized.The environment in which children are raised plays a crucial role in shaping their social and intellectual development, which is why it is important to know the state of orphanages and how they are managed.

The orphanage system in Iraq was developed in the 1950s, all orphans have a fair chance of getting in the orphanages when a place becomes available.Girls and boys are separated, and they can stay until they reach 18 years of age. However, there is no family environment, instead the children are living in an institution with standardized rules and regulations, fixed activities, mealtimes, and sleeping spaces.Relatives may visit the children sometimes, but it does not happen often.

A study in Ethiopia showed that children living in orphanages had fewer interactions and weaker attachments compared to other children.[15] In India, children living in orphanages

showed low expectations for their future. The same studies showed that compared to children living in orphanages, children living in foster homes (a temporary arrangement where the child is living with a family) and group homes with a caretaker who was a relative or known adult to the orphan, showed a better quality of life and more satisfaction. These studies show that children who have endured difficult or traumatic experiences need the support of a family member during their recovery journey. In contrast, orphanage systems lack familial environment and personal connections that children need, with large numbers of children crowded together in a small place and too few caregivers to provide adequate attention to each child.

According to a study in 2015, the distribution of the number of orphans based on country is shown in the below graphic, with Iraq being ranked the 13th country with the most orphans in the world. With such a high number of orphans and with orphanages being the only method of providing for them, orphanages cannot meet the demands of all the orphans of the country and fail to attend to their needs.

	Countries with High Numbers of Orphan	
	Country	The Number of Orphan
1	India	31,000,000[11]
2	Nigeria	17,500,000[12]
3	Ethiopia	5,500,000[13]
4	Bangladesh	4,900,000[14]
5	Pakistan	4,400,000[15]
6	The Republic of South Africa	4,238,000[16]
7	Uganda	2,700,000[17]
8	Philippines	2,500,000[18]
9	Mozambique	2,100,000[19]
10	Afghanistan	1,600,000[20]
11	Zimbabwe	1,600,000[21]
12	Zambia	1,453,000[22]
13	Iraq	1,450,000[23]
14	Malawi	1,309,000[24]

Credit:UNICEF

Besides the high number of orphans in the country, there is also a high number of children who live like orphans even though they have a caretaker parent alive or even both parents. This phenomenon is described as (Social Orphanhood).[16]Many children live with their parents but lack safety and support due to neglect, poverty, disease, substance dependency and abuse. Orphanages have to take in orphans and children with inadequate living conditions making it even more difficult to provide care for everyone.

Many attempts were made to contact humanitarian organizations and social services in the in the process of preparing this paper, but arranging meetings or obtaining data on orphans

in Iraq proved challenging. This further highlights the limited resources available to those managing orphan care. Staff at orphanages are often overwhelmed, focusing all their time and energy on maintaining daily operations, leaving them with little capacity to investigate the underlying issues or develop long-term solutions to the problems they face.

Credit: The Lotus Flower

Challenges Faced by Orphans in Iraq

1. Health-related problems

Orphans of Iraq are one of the most underprivileged groups of the country, their isolation from a community makes them more liable to health issues. The absence of maternal figures in their lives makes access to health education and medication much too delayed.

In 2020, Tishk University's Dentistry Faculty studied the oral health of 56 orphans aged 6 to 15 in an Erbil orphanage. The study revealed that 65% of their primary teeth had cavities. A questionnaire for the children and caregivers showed a lack of oral health knowledge, afterwards an educational program was provided to them which in other studies showed improvements among the residents in other countries. A follow-up assessment, however, showed no improvements in this orphanage, showing the need for increased health services to support orphans' physical well-being in Iraq.[17]

Health related problems are especially prevalent among children living in the harsh conditions of refugee camps and war zones, and they often develop health-related problems such as regression of growth and development, Anemia, Diarrhea, Malaria

Contagious diseases such as respiratory tract infections, sexually transmitted infections.[18] A study was conducted in Tikrit City, Iraq, to assess the health and nutritional status of orphans living in a social institute. The sample included 40 orphans between the ages of 3-18 years old. 50% of the orphans had lost their father, 30% had lost their mother, and 20% had lost both parents.

Of this group, 38% had measles, 31% had mumps, 18% had rubella, and 4% had typhoid fever. 47% had an unknown immunization history. 6% were anemic, 8% had gross physical anomalies, 17% were neurologically abnormal (mentally retarded), and 26% were psychologically upset. Nutritional status was assessed, with 15-19% being underweight, 20-25% being normal weight, and over 25% being overweight.[19]

There are also great risks of bodily harm for orphans living in war zone areas, Orphans are often left unprotected in hazardous environments, making them more susceptible to injuries caused by landmines, bombings, and other remnants of war. 8,000-10,000 children either die or become disabled every year due to explosion of land mines that were installed by the opponent countries in previous wars. In the 9 years of the Syrian war, 4,469 children were

arrested with their fates still unknown. 42% of Palestinian children who are trying to survive under Israeli attacks have more than one disability. [20]

2. Psychological Distress

A 1992 study led by Dr. Ahmed Abdulbaghi, a psychiatrist specializing in child and adolescent mental health and a professor at Uppsala University Hospital, assessed the psychological health of children in an orphanage in Iraqi Kurdistan. Conducted in collaboration with the Faculty of Medicine at Uppsala University in Sweden and the University of Duhok.

The study used the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) questionnaire to identify the psychological issues the children have. The results showed high tendencies to be destructive, aggression toward others, jealousy, anxiety, depression, association with troubled kids, attention problems, auditory hallucinations, perceived hostility from others, negative thoughts, and fear of wrongdoing. Additionally, the Harvard–Uppsala Trauma Questionnaire for Children (HUTQ-C) was conducted to assess post-traumatic symptoms, and the results revealed that 47.4% of the children met the criteria for PTSD. [21]

A one year and two years follow-up investigation showed considerable deterioration in psychological health and school attendance among the orphans living in the same orphanage.

Orphans Living in active war zones have it even harder. 420 million children are living under dangerous and unstable conditions. They experience a challenging reality filled with gun shots, bombing, airstrikes, kidnapping, and constant death. This can cause psychological damage such as paranoia, severe depression, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, suicidal ideations, burnout syndrome, hyperactivity, as well as feeling worthless and lonely.

<u>3. Social Conflicts</u>

To assess the social needs of orphans in Iraq, a study was carried out among 200 orphan students at secondary schools in Al- Qadisiyah governorate.[22] It was found that while most of the orphans showed moderately unmet social needs, many felt some social satisfaction, largely due to their school environment where they could connect with peers in ways not possible at home. A big issue facing orphans living in Iraq is their inability to go to school, this is because many don't have identification papers, preventing them from going to school to receive the psychosocial support they require.

Table 1 shows the results of the survey used to assess the social needs of orphans, the participants were asked a series of questions and instructed to rank their responses on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest). The key findings are:

- For the need "I find myself separated from others in my way of thinking", the mean assessment score was 2.52, indicating a moderate level of satisfaction with this need.

- For the need "I can't find anyone to help me solve my problems", the mean assessment score was 2.59, also indicating a moderate level of satisfaction.

- For the need "I feel social isolation", the mean assessment score was 2.37, again suggesting a moderate level of satisfaction.

Social needs	Scale	Number (%)	M	Assess.
I find myself separated from others in my way of thinking	Never applied	56 (28)	2.52	Moderate
	Rarely applied	35 (17.5)		
	Sometimes applied	**59 (29.5)**		
	Applies Much	50 (25)		
I can't find anyone to help me solve my problems	Never applied	57 (28.5)	2.59	Moderate
	Rarely applied	36 (18)		
	Sometimes applied	40 (20)		
	Applies Much	**67 (33.5)**		
I feel social isolation	Never applied	**63 (31.5)**	2.37	Moderate
	Rarely applied	46 (23)		
	Sometimes applied	45 (22.5)		
	Applies Much	46 (23)		

Source:Rawal Medical Journal

These findings show the important role social settings, such as schools, play in meeting the social needs of orphans. This highlights the need for more spaces where orphans can socialize, engage in community activities, and develop their sense of belonging.

4.Security Issues

In addition to the health and economic challenges they face, orphans in war zones face serious risks of exploitation, abuse, and lack of legal protection.[23]

Exploitation and abuse by criminal groups: poachers with bad intentions, are major threat groups for thousands of unprotected orphans. Whether it is criminal gangs recruiting children to brainwash them into extreme beliefs and violent tendencies, or individuals exploiting young orphans into sex trafficking, panhandling and even terrorism.

Corruption and exploitation by those claiming to help:More conscious measures should be taken to address individuals and organizations that, under the guise of international aid, impose ideologies that undermine orphans' cultural and social values.

Lack of legal protection: The law must increase the intensity of punishment for the people who abuse children with their illegal actions to better protect orphans.

General insecurity and violence in conflict zones: orphans face many challenges in conflict-affected areas, where they are among the most vulnerable.

5. Access to Education

One of the biggest problems facing orphaned children in Iraq is that they are undocumented and don't have identification papers, making it impossible for them to go to school and receive education.[24] Many of these cases are caused by births outside of marriage or marriages outside of the court, by religious groups in rural areas, resulting in undocumented births. When the parents, or one parent, dies, or the child is simply abandoned, they become an orphan without any identifications or support.[25]

While schools still have considerable progress to make in accommodating for the social needs of orphans and providing a supportive environment to counterbalance the lack of support they often experience at home, the role of school in their social development is evident. Access to school is essential in orphans' psychosocial growth and building connections that are otherwise missing in their lives. Based on the findings of this study, it is crucial that all orphans have access to school, regardless of identification barriers, to meet their social needs and support their overall development.

Studies show that children with one parent tend to perform worse academically than those with both parents. This challenge is amplified for orphans in war zones, who face even greater educational barriers.[26]

Schools play a crucial role in meeting orphans' social and psychological needs, offering community, belonging, and support. They provide opportunities to build social skills, access mental health resources, and receive counseling.

To support orphaned children, educational aid is essential, along with efforts to prevent them from having to work at a young age in order to alleviate their anxiety of surviving.

Credit: Hayat Orphanage

International Aid

International aid organizations play a crucial role in supporting orphans and children in war torn countries. A lot of Christian aid foundations contribute by providing food, shelter, work opportunities, educational support, and health services to those in need. However, there is a lack of international aid for orphaned children in Iraq because of religious sensitivities. Christian aid foundations sometimes use humanitarian aid to convert orphans and local populations to Christianity, particularly in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Balkans. This makes it difficult to accept their aid in certain places with their own strong religious beliefs, Islamic or other.[27]

International aid efforts must be transparent and ethical, focusing solely on helping those in need without pursuing agendas like religious conversion. Humanitarian organizations should follow values such as transparency and inclusivity, ensuring aid for everyone regardless of religion, race, language, or sect.

Credit: The National

Success Stories

In 2004, Hisham al-Dahabi, an Iraqi activist and psychological researcher, established the Iraqi House of Creativity to provide shelter and education for homeless orphaned children. He provided them with education and practical life skills such as sewing, hairdressing, computer work, journalism, media, as well as giving them the chance to do fun activities and hobbies such as music, sports, and drawing. In 2017, the Iraqi House of Creativity celebrated the graduation of 150 orphans. Hisham al-Dahabi commented "*They entered as children and left as young men to continue their working lives, some of them succeeding in [starting their own families]*." He also stated that he never abandons any child until he is assured of their future.

Over 11 years he has embraced 480 male orphans who successfully left the house to pursue their adult lives.[28]

Credit : The Iraqi Fashion House

Policy Recommendations

The challenges facing orphans today require solutions beyond traditional orphanage care, focusing on long-term support, integration, and opportunities for a better future. Below are proposed ways to address this issue:

- Implementation of additional well-funded and closely monitored programs to support the growing number of orphans. This will relief the burden on orphanages, by using community resources such as kinship networks, community groups, and foster care programs.

- The formation of a committee within the Ministry of Interior to be tasked with surveying rural areas for the purpose of recording the number of unregistered

children. Then provide these orphans with identification documentation to allow them to enroll in schools. This will prepare the orphans for a future with potential for growth and job opportunities.

- The government, in collaboration with NGO's and civil society organizations, should adopt programs that continue to monitor the progress of orphans even after they leave orphanages at the age of 18. Having housing shelters and providing access to basic health needs, as well as continued support by assisting them in finding proper jobs, will ensure their integration into society as productive members.

Credit: Truthout

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