

Child Kidnapping in Iraq: Another Legacy of US Military Occupation

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Almost one year after the so-called withdrawal of American military troops, the security situation in Baghdad has not improved. Families are living in fear because of a dramatic increase in the number of cases of child abduction. These kidnappings have different aims. Some are meant to finance terrorist groups. But Iraqi children are also abducted for the very lucrative trafficking of human organs.

A security source revealed that in one day, on 6 November, 21 children were abducted from different places in Baghdad. Recently there has been an increase in child kidnapping in all areas of Baghdad, he said, adding that he has no accurate numbers, but that there have been up to 30 children kidnapped in two weeks. He also added that most of these abductions have been carried out by organized criminal gangs. Some armed groups kidnap children to finance their operations, especially Al-Qaida, because the security forces have recently been quite successful in draining their resources in preventing donations from outside Iraq.

It seems that not only children from rich families are being kidnapped. Many incidents take place in the suburbs and poor areas of the Capital, like Al-Ubaidi District, Sadr City, Baghdad Al-Jadeeda (Al-Rasafah Area), and Abu-Disheer, Al-Doura, Al-Bayyaa, Al-Furat, Al-Radwaniyah, Abu Ghraib, Al-Taji, Al-Shula and Al-Hurriyah Districts (Al Kark area).

Kamil Hasan, a police officer, said that almost 20 children were kidnapped in Baghdad from August till October, but added that there are no accurate numbers available. Many cases go unreported, because relatives are worried about antagonising the kidnappers.

The ransom a family has to pay varies between \$ 20.000 and \$ 100.000, depending on the financial situation of the family. The kidnappers already know the financial capacities of the family. Hasan assured that this kidnapping spree has turned from a terrorist related crime into a social phenomenon. In some cases the kidnappings are drugs related.

Children have been regularly abducted in Iraq since 2003. They are often easier to hold in captivity, while extended family members and even wider communities are often much more willing to provide the financial assistance to the child's immediate family in order to pay the ransom. Given the comparative ease involved in kidnapping a child over an adult, the cruel tactic is likely to continue.

Sometimes the kidnappers kill the kidnapped victim immediately, and then ask for the ransom. In the south of Baghdad Mawlood Muhammad, a child, was found dead near the river, after the family had paid \$ 50.000 to get him back.

Social researcher Sawsan Al-Ubaidi said that sometimes little girls are kidnapped, raped and then killed, even after the ransom is paid. One such case is Hanaa Al-Husaini , 12 years old girl, who was kidnapped in front of her house in the Al-Karradah district in Baghdad. Her corpse was found after she was raped and left in the street.

Some politicians and many citizens believe that kidnapping children is not such a spontaneous activity, that there are political agendas behind the kidnappings.

Ali Shubbar, a Human Rights Member in the Parliament is convinced that there are terrorist organizations behind such recurrent kidnapping crimes, and that there might also be foreign agendas behind this phenomenon. This suspicion is reinforced by the fake attempts and threats of kidnapping, which occur very regularly and create an environment of fear.

An anonymous source in the Ministry of Interior assured that the issue is bigger than kidnapping for a ransom, because organized gangs are currently operating in Iraq and they are supervised by human traffickers and people who work in the prostitution sector. It's not only about selling girls for sexual pleasure. Rather, it's about selling human organs, or using the kidnapped girls for pregnancy purposes to sell the new born babies in the International market.

Whatever the motives of the kidnappers, the consequences can be easily predicted: a decrease in school attendance, children who have to stay inside the house, the parents who live in a constant state of fear and have to accompany their children wherever they go etc. In such circumstances it's impossible to restore community life, impossible to give a decent education to a whole generation of young Iraqis. But maybe that's exactly the intention, to keep the Iraqi populace in a constant state of fear and chaos.

Iraqi orphans are extremely vulnerable and are an easy target for criminal gangs. A recent survey in Iraq, revealed in a BBC article of 28 November, found that between 800,000 to a million Iraqi children have lost one or both of their parents. According to aid workers this figure is a conservative estimate of the many thousands growing up in the shadow of violence. The phenomenal rise in the number of Iraqi orphans has created a social crisis in a country that has less than 200 social workers and psychiatrists put together, for a population of 30 million people. It has no child protection laws. Officials say that desperately needed welfare legislation has been held hostage to sectarian squabbling in parliament. In the meantime these orphans are being kidnapped by human traffickers and sold for their organs. Some of them are abducted by terrorist groups and forced to work for them.

Kidnapping for ransom is a common occurrence in various parts of the world, and certain cities and countries are often described as the "Kidnapping Capital of the World." In 2007, that title belonged to Iraq (they were in second place in 2006), with possibly 1,500 foreigners kidnapped. In 2004, it was Mexico, and in 2001, it was Colombia. But even though kidnapping happens all over the world, this phenomenon was non-existent prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Thus the US Administration bears full responsibility for all the abductions that have taken place in occupied Iraq.

Kidnapping is also a common tactic in American counterinsurgency warfare. The reputation of the U.S. Army School Of the America's (SOA) was permanently stained after the 1996 declassification of several of its training manuals. The manuals provided documented evidence that SOA instructors had taught and advocated methods of torture, extortion,

kidnapping, and execution in the counterinsurgency wars. The Pentagon claimed that the manuals contained only isolated “objectionable” passages, and continued a long pattern of denial by arguing that the manuals had not been properly cleared and did not represent U.S. government policy. Given the historical record, those denials were not credible.

In the 1980s, the SOA became a symbol of U.S. foreign policy perversities in Latin America. By then, many graduates of the school were already infamous in their own countries for their leadership of, or involvement in, savage counterinsurgency campaigns and human rights atrocities. The SOA was known in the region as the School of Assassins or the School of Coups. The names of SOA graduates are familiar to Latin Americanists: dictator Hugo Banzer of Bolivia, who took power in a bloody coup; Leopoldo Galtieri, Argentine general and member of the “dirty war” junta in the 1980s; Roberto d’Aubuisson, leader of Salvadoran death squads; General Efraín Ríos Montt, overseer of massacres of indigenous peasants as dictator in Guatemala; Chilean Miguel Krassnoff, DINA officer and torturer; the list goes on. The U.N. Truth Commission on El Salvador found that 60 Salvadoran officers were responsible for the worst atrocities of that country’s dirty war; more than two-thirds were SOA graduates. More than 60,000 Latin American officers have trained at the SOA.

And as we know, many of these people were transferred to Iraq after 2003. Many Iraqi militia members who were trained and armed by these thugs are still roaming free on the Iraqi streets. Their funds have become depleted since their US paymasters have left the country. So why should they not earn some hard cash by abducting children? After all they have unlearned all morality during their years of savage dead squad activities.

Since 2003 Iraqis have been terrorised by child kidnaps, because the US invaders deliberately organized chaos and lawlessness by disbanding the Iraqi army and police. In October 2003, Oliver Burch, Christian Aid’s emergency programme manager for Iraq, said many Iraqis had told him of an alarming growth in abductions, “that unemployment is the biggest problem and that the economic situation is pushing people into crime. The newly created police are not respected at all because they are associated with the Americans, who are increasingly resented in Iraq now”, he said, and he added that “the so-called liberators should at least provide security. They have made it possible for thieves to take anything. Nothing was done from the beginning to stop looting. Everyone now tends to stay at home. If you have a decent car, it could cost you your life.” As a consequence around 50% of children were not going to school, according to a spokesman for Save the Children UK.

Since then there have been many reports in the mainstream press about kidnappings, but not much has been done to solve the problem, certainly not by the occupation forces. Not many abduction cases have been solved, even though the Iraqi authorities claim that their security forces are gradually improving their capability in the field of tackling the problem.

But it’s doubtful that the problem will ever be solved as long as the Iraqi government is run by Maliki and his militia’s.

Al Jazeera disclosed some classified reports in October 2010. One was a very revealing one:

In October 2006, an Iraqi army unit reportedly robbed a number of people living in Sunni neighbourhoods in western Baghdad. The unit was arrested on October 11 – and told its captors that it was operating under the authority of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki.

1/5/6 IA patrol stops 2X IA M1114s and 1X pick up truck occupied by 17X LNs in IA uniforms

and equipment. 5/6 orders detention of all 17 individuals and vehicles due to reports over several days of 2X IA M1114s conducting robberies in the Mansour and Washash areas of 5/6 IA battle space. [...] Detainees claim to be Iraqi Special Forces working for the prime minister's office.

The unit seems to be a sort of "detention squad" operating under al-Maliki's authority. An official from the defence ministry showed up several hours later and urged the US to release the men, saying their mission was "directed by PM Maliki".

That's enough proof of the criminal nature of Maliki's security forces, and it's written in black and white, in an official document.

The Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms Leila Zerrougui, should urgently investigate this growing phenomenon of child kidnapping in Iraq and determine who is responsible for these grave violations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Of course the USA has never signed this UN Convention: for them children living in Iraq are negligible human beings. But for Iraq, they are the future.

Dirk Adriaensens is coordinator of SOS Iraq and member of the executive committee of the BRussells Tribunal. Between 1992 and 2003 he led several delegations to Iraq to observe the devastating effects of UN imposed sanctions. He was a member of the International Organizing Committee of the World Tribunal on Iraq (2003-2005). He is also co-coordinator of the Global Campaign Against the Assassination of Iraqi Academics. He is co-author of Rendez-Vous in Baghdad, EPO (1994), Cultural Cleansing in Iraq, Pluto Press, London (2010), Beyond Educide, Academia Press, Ghent (2012), and is a frequent contributor to Global Research, Truthout, The International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies and other media.

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