

Young Iraqis see Suicide as an Escape

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Previously little known in Iraq, the rate of suicides is increasing as desperate youth with little to live for take their own lives.

In a recent report, Amnesty International detailed dozens of tragic stories of women and girls choosing suicide to escape the brutality of the Islamic State group (IS, formerly ISIS), as they rampaged through large swathes of Iraq, capturing women and children, especially from religious minorities, and selling them on for forced marriage and slavery.

The [report](#), *Escape from hell: Torture, sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq*, was a deeply disturbing document of human misery. It is also, sadly, just the tip of the iceberg in Iraq where the number of suicides, previously a rare phenomenon, has spiked since it was “liberated” by the US-led “coalition of the willing” in 2003.

Suicide rates are rising especially among Iraqi youths right across the country, whether in IS-controlled territory or in the relatively stable southern provinces or Baghdad. The phenomenon used to be largely confined to Kurdish areas in the north, where self-immolation has long been seen as Kurdish women trying to escape gender-based violence and the practice of early arranged marriage.

According to the Kurdish Regional Government’s Ministry of Human Rights, there were over [3,700 cases](#) of cases of infant betrothal in 2010 across Iraqi Kurdistan’s five regions. This is a predominantly rural phenomenon, in areas where traditional tribal practices continue to dominate. In today’s neo-liberal economies of Kurdistan’s largest cities, a rapid rate of change in the role and status of women in society has ameliorated the consequences of some of these practices but also shocked conservative Kurds. There, the numbers of early arranged marriages are declining. Elsewhere, they have been seen as a leading cause of suicides in young women and girls.

However, some of the 10,000 cases of self-immolation documented in Iraq’s Kurdish areas between 1991 and 2010 may not be suicides at all. So-called “honour” crimes are also widespread, and the Kurdish authorities are increasingly trying to clamp down on them. [International human rights organisations](#) believe a number of cases of reported suicide by self-immolation are likely to be “honour” murders disguised as self-immolation.

A growing phenomenon

But Kurdistan is not the only area afflicted by high suicide rates. Across the rest of Iraq suicides, especially among the youth, a third of the population, are on the rise. Previously almost unknown in Iraq, the aftermath of the country’s “liberation” in 2003 saw a sudden and significant upsurge in the phenomenon.

An early documented case happened in Baghdad in September 2003, when [Maqdad al-Duhaimi](#), a 19-year-old who got married a month earlier, picked up a rifle, aimed it at his head and pulled the trigger. Duhaimi served in the Iraqi army before the invasion. After Paul Bremer, head of The Coalition Provisional Authority, disbanded the army Maqdad begun selling soft drinks in the street to support his young wife, Hanah. It seems the shame of hardly earning enough to support his wife pushed him to kill himself.

This year, two well-reported cases included a policeman, and a young mother. Upon receiving orders to fight in Ramadi in Anbar province in June, police officer [Saad Aziz](#) made a phone call to his family, then shot himself. And a 20-year-old mother from Najaf, south of Baghdad, [burned herself](#) to death in March after being beaten by her husband.

Since Duhaimi wielded that rifle on himself there has been a dramatic increase in the number of suicides in Iraq. In 2013, according to the Iraqi Human Rights Commission (IHRC), 439 cases of suicide were documented in Iraq, a rise of 60 percent (excluding Iraqi Kurdistan) on 2012.

Most of those who killed themselves – employing methods ranging from self-immolation and hanging to poison – were young. Dhi Qar province, in southern Iraq, recorded the highest incidence of suicides with 119. These figures, moreover, are likely to understate the problem. Because of social stigma and religious taboos, it is safe to assume that many suicides and attempted suicides, for which no data is available, go unreported.

Many of the causes can be traced to the desperate socio-economic circumstances many Iraqis find themselves in. With widespread poverty, high unemployment, and no progress toward such lofty ideals as “freedom” and the now widely despised concept of “democracy”, Iraqi youths have little to look forward to.

Violence and escape

Moreover, violence is everywhere. In a July 2014 study, presented at the World Congress for Middle East Studies in Ankara in August, Ameel al-Shawi, of Iraq’s College of Medicine, found that with their daily lives surrounded by violence and terror, more than 40 percent of Iraqi university students found themselves thinking of death as an escape. The paper, *The effect of violence on youth in Iraq*, concluded that Iraqi youths, unlike North African youths who risk death trying to cross the Mediterranean for European shores, see death as an option in itself.

There are other ways to escape, like joining Iraq’s increasingly numerous and increasingly murderous militias, which hide behind one religious banner or another, whether it be the Sunni Islamic State group’s call to global Jihad or Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani’s fatwa calling for a “righteous jihad”. These are, perhaps, simply another way for youth to commit suicide.

My generation grew up believing that Iraqis generally do not consider suicide to be an option. Even the most bohemian of Iraqi poets, renowned for their morbid poems and seeking oblivion through drink, would have surprised suicide-contemplating western intellectuals with their raw attachment to life. The urge to live is fundamental in our culture.

An exception was Hayat Sharara, a brilliant writer and academic, who committed suicide together with her daughter in 1996, because of a combination of domestic political pressure

on academics and the brutality of international economic sanctions. Describing these sanctions, she said: "Hunger walks through this land like a giant monster, destroying everything under its feet. When it opens its mouth, it crushes people 's souls with its jaws."

"Well, we just exist ", Hayat concluded.

This was long before the rise of IS, and if the group has resorted to barbaric practices to instil fear and terror in the populace, it is only a reflection of what is already there, a consequence of three decades of US-led sanctions, occupation, torture and terror against the Iraqi people.

Judging by the sectarian, corrupt, lawless rule of consecutive Iraqi regimes since, the complete absence of any national economic strategy to provide education, employment and equal citizenship, future generations of Iraqis will also see suicide as an option.

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