

“We came to the United States to find a better future, not to be prostitutes. . . . No woman or child would want to be a sex slave and endure the evil that I have gone through. I am in fear for my life more than ever. I helped put these evil men in jail. Please help me. Please help us. Please do not let this happen to anyone else.”

--Maria, trafficking survivor [1]

Iraqi Children Emergency

By Wafaa' Al-Natheema

Our Institute is launching a campaign to document eyewitnesses from inside and outside Iraq who observed the kidnapping and/or the selling of Iraqi children or those who are able to locate kidnapped and sold children in their new environment. We are working to create a network of communities within Iraq and neighboring countries (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran and Kuwait) to monitor, provide alerts, exchange information and report to NGOs, families, the media and authorities to prevent children from being sold and especially from leaving Iraq. We need all the help we can muster to ensure the success of this mission.

Adoption and Trafficking

The trauma of Iraqi children and extreme suffering have not been only due to the killing and bombs, but also due to the deteriorating medical and health services, displacement, imprisonment and interruption of education. The ongoing displacement and/or the absence of one or both parents from children's life have made them vulnerable and put them in high risk. Orphans from poor families have been facing the most devastating condition than any segment of Iraqi society. They live in grave danger facing diseases, kidnapping and trafficking.

International adoption is among many problems facing Iraqis since the 2003 war and occupation. By taking Iraqi children out of their environment and culture to live with foreign families, the advocates and sponsors of “goodwill” adoptions are committing inhumane practices. Adoption is

another phenomenon occurring in the “First World” to fulfill certain elements of globalization by focusing on “Third World” poor children who are vulnerable and have no one to speak on their behalf.

Furthermore, foreign adoption, which necessitates the creation of a “bank” of orphans from “Third-World” countries and agencies serving “First World” costumers with a “supply” of children, is nothing but a form of slavery. The practice exalts the adopted child as “fortunate,” “chosen,” or “saved”. It is indeed problematic to bring foreign-born babies and children into white-dominant, materialistic, individualistic and nuclear family-based cultures while factoring in the language and religious barriers between the two worlds.

What kind of industrial western rationale is this to allow for the adoption of children from the less developed or underdeveloped worlds while simultaneously treating their adults who already live in the west or coming to it as immigrants with discrimination, antagonism and harsh surveillance?

Adoption would surely eliminate the cultural, religious, linguistic and social background of the adopted children. In Islamic countries such as Iraq, the Qur’an prohibits adoption and insists on children maintaining their name, lineage, religion and original community.

When a French NGO named *Arche de Zoe* [2] [3] attempted to airlift children from Chad for adoption in France, Ann Veneman, Executive Director of UNICEF, stated:

“It is unacceptable to see children taken out of their home countries without compliance with national and international laws.” Actually, it is unacceptable to take children out of their homelands with or without laws.

Foreign adoption and child trafficking in Iraq was unheard of before the 2003 war and occupation. Iraqis fear that children are being trafficked for sex employment and organ transplant market. This is highly possible in light of the fact that an interior ministry official, Hassan Alaa, has reported to Al-Jazeera, that “*government forces have captured 15 human trafficking gangs.*” [4] Confessions from these gangs indicated that they usually drug children while on route traveling out of Iraq so that they would be sleeping at checkpoints.

Child traffickers often manipulate children and even their poor parent into thinking that they are taken for “goodwill” adoption. Why would an adoption agency resort to such inhumane and secretive practices, unless the intended mission behind exporting children outside IRAQ is highly immoral and/or criminal?

This is very alarming in a country with an estimated number of nearly two million orphans and a government unable to even provide basic services such as drinking water and electricity, never mind security and order!

The Selling of Children

In 2008, Al-Jazeera reported, “*Omar Khalaf, vice-president of the Iraqi Families Association, (IFA), a NGO established in 2004 to register cases of those missing and trafficked, said that at least two children are sold by their parents every week.*” [4] This is disturbing not only because it is

unprecedented, but also because it has occurred in a country where its culture **does not permit adoption**, never mind the selling of children!

According to the same al-Jazeera report, traffickers are selling an Iraqi child for \$3000 and a young baby for \$30,000. The proof that these buyers have no respect and compassion for these children is in the fact that infants and young babies are worth much more because they know nothing about their environment, lineage and language!

In an April 2009 Guardian report [5], the number of children sold per month is said to be at least fifteen, “*some overseas, some internally, some for adoption, some for sexual abuse.*” However, in this report the purchasing price of a child by traffickers varies between \$400 (£200) and \$8000 (£4,000). Comparing these with the selling prices reported in al-Jazeera article, these gangs are making a profit of \$2500 to \$22000 per child. The report enlisted the main countries in which Iraqi children have been sold are Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Switzerland, Ireland, the UK, Sweden and Portugal while al-Jazeera report added Lebanon and the Netherlands to the list.

In the Guardian and al-Jazeera reports, **the absence** of the USA from the list of countries in which Iraqi children have been sold **is quite puzzling** knowing that the USA is a leading country where young children kidnapped and trafficked for adoption by families with no children, that the USA is one of two leading countries (besides Japan) in child sex pornography, and that

the US military in Iraq went as far as transporting stray dogs to New Jersey for adoption according to a Reuters report in 2008 [6]. Additionally, the USA army has detained hundreds of children in prisons with various sources documenting their number to be between 850 to 2400; most have been sexually abused and some are missing or killed! These facts combined raise suspicion as to why the USA has not been disclosed by mainstream media as one of the countries transporting Iraqi children inside its borders!

Iraqi witnesses and few reports have indicated that Baghdad's Green Zone where the USA embassy is located has been the center for the criminal practices of child trafficking [7] [8], yet the US embassy publishes on its website the following statement, "*As of October 2005, there is no adoption under Iraqi law, only guardianship, which the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Department of Homeland Security (formerly the INS) and the Board of Immigration Appeals have deemed insufficient for the purposes of immigration under the Immigration and Nationality Act. As defined by the Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, guardianship is only granted to extended family or friends who can provide for the child in Iraq. Additionally, a family cannot obtain guardianship over a child of a different religious faith. Iraqi law does not permit foreigners to obtain legal guardianship of Iraqi children. Iraqi nationals living in the United States who are interested in adopting Iraqi orphans are subject to the same guardianship requirements as other foreigners.*" [9]

This statement denotes that foreign adoption, nevermind child trafficking, as a result of Iraqi law, has been irrelevant practices to citizens of the USA. But from the history of US presence in Iraq since 2003, we can be certain that respect for Iraqis and Iraqi law by the US is non-existing. Despite the published statement on US Embassy's website, there have been exceptions for USA military personnel. According to an article (dated December 2007) by FOXNews.com [10], Captain Scott Southworth was able to obtain custody of an Iraqi handicapped boy despite being unmarried! The article was pervaded with propaganda and patronage. This involvement by the military reminds us of France's case when NGO *Arche de Zoe*'s members "were granted access to French military aircraft and facilities in Chad" to help airlifting African children into France, a case that luckily did not succeed and the children were not airlifted. [11]

Conclusion

“The highest ‘demand side’ of children for exploitation is the USA and Japan.” [12]

The US war and occupation are the direct cause for this tragedy. The Green Zone with the criminal practices of child trafficking should be immediately exposed and those involved in it must be severely punished [13].

As of May 2009, the UN’s Human Rights Council has never discussed the human rights situation in Iraq following the invasion of 2003. The dire situation of Iraqi children is one grave example of the negligence by the international community.

Child trafficking requires immediate actions not just from the International communities and humanitarian organizations, but also by the Iraqi government and neighboring governments of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Turkey and Iran. They must create their own collaborative version of “Homeland Security” to prevent the exit of Iraqi children from IRAQ, severely punish gangs and seriously discipline parents for selling their children. Similar to the African Union’s statement and action regarding the France-Chad case [14], the League of Arab States must issue statements of condemnation and negotiate with neighboring Arab and non-Arab governments for the elimination of this outrageous form of slavery. More importantly Iraqi organizations, families and extended communities must monitor and take immediate actions to help parents refrain from selling their children!

Poverty and absence of work are no excuses to selling one’s children.

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