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The Unheard Cries and Unseen Tears of the Middle East
Brief Overview of Orphans and Vulnerable Children in the Middle East

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In the discussion around orphans and vulnerable children today we often focus on the United States, sub-Saharan and central Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. It is incredibly important to discuss these regions in our world, as some of these countries are home to hundreds of thousands of orphans and vulnerable children who face violence daily. We must research and be aware of the situation for every child in every country and region of the world. However, when we look at statistics and research surrounding these children there is one region that seems to be continually left out, the Middle East. Is it because the Middle East does not have any orphans, street children, trafficking, child soldiers or violence against children? Are children's rights in the Middle East being upheld and protected? Unfortunately, this is not the case at all. So why do we know so little about orphans and vulnerable children in the Middle East? What is the history behind this topic in the region, how does culture, religion and conflict correlate? Are there children rights in the Middle East and if so, are they being upheld? As many continue to pioneer work for children at risk around the world it is crucial that we do not leave the children in the Middle East out of such discussions, work and efforts. There are hundreds of thousands of children whose rights are being violated daily, who are at risk, abandoned and vulnerable. There are generations of children who have cried out for mercy and justice that the world has not heard, multitudes who have shed tears that no one has seen.

Though a special focus should be given to every country within the Middle East this paper focuses mainly on Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, with the inclusion of Afghanistan. Though Afghanistan is considered South Asia, it will be included in this as it is a border to Iran, had a relationship with and been deeply impacted by the Middle East and they are almost one-hundred percent Muslim. Afghanistan's vulnerable children and orphans are typically left out of

conversations surrounding both the Middle East and Southern Asia, this makes the state of their children vague.

Understanding the history of orphans and vulnerable children in the Middle East is pertinent to grasping the current situation. Unfortunately, research, articles and books about the history of children in the ancient world, the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Empire and even today are scarce as children have been viewed “less than” in the eyes of history. Their take on history has often been discounted because they are still developing into adults and are in a state of dependence, leaving the stories of orphans and vulnerable children unheard.

We can trace the history of orphans back to the ancient Mediterranean world, throughout the Old Testament and New Testament in the Bible we see scriptures that command the Jewish people and Christians to care for the fatherless and the orphan. “J. U. Krause estimates that during the time of the Roman Empire some forty to forty-five percent of children under the age of fifteen had lost their father” (Fitzgerald, 2016). Meaning almost half of the population under fifteen years old was an orphan, leading many historians to say that fatherlessness and orphans were a much more critical issue in the ancient world than for first world countries today (Fitzgerald, 2016). These orphans were a product of war, low life expectancy, lack of public health and men dying before women (due to early marriages for women). In the ancient world, the notion that orphans are vulnerable, powerless and weak was openly recognized. Many historians argue that a large emphasis was on orphans throughout Jewish and Biblical prophets and kings because there was abuse, injustice and neglect occurring. We can look at the biblical prophets in the book of Isaiah and Ezekiel and see that the rebuke from God often had to do with the poor, oppressed, orphaned and fatherless being neglected (Prince, 2000). In the ancient world

and during the Roman Empire adoption was common, often widows would hope for their children to be bought by a rich family who was barren, or children who had neither mother or father would go to kinship care. Typically adopted children in this time were not cared for well and more often than not they were used as servants. Almost all children adopted were male and were used to secure the family name or to secure a place as warriors in battle (ASMA, 2011). Arab orphans, mostly males, would be adopted, but in the process of adoption pre-Islam they would be enslaved or given the birth identity of the adopted father, this meant that their national and tribal identity was erased (ASMA, 2011).

In 600 C.E. the prophet, Muhammed emerged, Muhammed was an orphan and was raised by his uncle. During this period the orphan was overlooked and rejected by society (Armstrong, 2002). 600 C.E. was a challenging time for Arabs as Orthodox Christianity and Judaism had spread throughout the Middle East and at this time it was “common knowledge” that the Arab people had been overlooked and left out of Gods plan for humanity (Armstrong, 2002). They were rejected religiously and racially, making an Arab orphan even more vulnerable. This is important to keep in mind as this rise of Islam began in 612 C.E. When Arabs perceived that god (Allah) had spoken to not only an Arab but also an orphan they clung to every word with hope that they were no longer left out the divine plan for humanity and that this god (Allah) cared for them (Armstrong, 2002).. In the history of Islam, we see two of the most prevalent and powerful Imam’s, Imam al-Shafi’i and Imam al-Bukhari, were both orphans as well (Armstrong, 2002). Later in his life, Muhammed adopted a young man, Zayd Ibn Haritha, however, the adoption process at the time was not equivalent to what we would consider adoption. Within a short time, Islam began to conquer more territory and gain more converts. Muhammed, the first caliphates

and Imams placed a strong emphasis on orphan care unto their children keeping their national identity and beliefs at all costs. As decades passed caring for orphans was again pushed aside, orphans were stigmatized, mistreated and incredibly vulnerable (Brand, 2017).

During the late 1800s, we see the beginnings of concern for orphans and destitute children come about again in the Ottoman Empire. New government efforts for children's' rights emerged, before this period children were not being taken care of, were often abandoned and even those who were not orphaned were mistreated, disciplined harshly and used for social control (Maksudyan, 2014). Orphans were typically being sold as slaves, this meant forcing them into hard labor, being servants to the upper class and many were used as sex-slaves. Children who were destitute or on the streets would be kidnapped, killed, used in battle, sold and taken to other countries. Missionaries began to see these destitute children in a new light and American missionaries began to get more involved in the lives of orphans. A social concern began to emerge in the Ottoman Empire as they considered what would happen to these children who had been kidnapped, abused and mistreated. The concern was that these children could grow up to be dangerous criminals, revolt or start a revolution (Maksudyan, 2014). This concern to society, the increase in war and lack of resources in the Ottoman Empire led to an opportunity for non-Muslim interventions. The open door for Christians to save the neglected children in the Ottoman Empire became a heated issue as Muslims and locals did not want to see children lose their religion, national heritage or identity. Towards the end of the 1800s, these children were at the forefront of political issues, crisis, war, debates on conversion, national and international rivalry (Maksudyan, 2014). Deciding who would have access to these children became a territorial battle that was often more focused on nationalism than on the best interest of children.

In 1867, a policy was made that dictated that every province within the Ottoman Empire must have some type of institutional care, or *islahhane*, for children. These *islahhanes* were established in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Israel and Greece (Ottoman archives, 1899). *Islahhane* translates to “reform house” and was taken from the Quran, the intention of calling these institutions was “to improve and reform” children in the Ottoman Empire (Maksudyan, 2014). This layout for orphan care had the intention of continuing to educate and raise children in the Ottoman Empire in the ways of Islam, the Quran and the prophet Muhammed. Previously, *islahhanes* were strictly used for juvenile delinquents, therefore switching these places for institutional care homes was not a smooth transition and orphans were housed with delinquents and typically all were mistreated.

Towards the end of 1800s suspicions of Christian aid workers began to develop within the Ottoman Empire. In 1896, Clara Barton attempted to bring relief with the Red Cross to Turkey after another crisis had hit, she, along with anyone in the Red Cross, were denied the ability to do any aid work in the Ottoman Empire at the time (Maksudyan, 2014). In September of 1897, a commission was created, it was made up of three Muslim Sheikhs, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Interior, Armenians and a Greek Orthodox, their mission was to hinder any conversion of the Ottoman population with vigilant efforts that everyone would keep their own religion (Maksudyan, 2014). This began a slow process of shutting down any foreign run orphanages in the region.

After World War I in the early 1900s, massacres, disease, displacement, famines and economic issues left devastating effects on children in the Ottoman Empire. Historians have estimated there was anywhere from 150,000 to 700,000 left orphaned during this time (Brand,

2017). The majority of these children were Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish and Syrian, the highest population being Armenian due to the genocide in 1915 (Brand, 2017). “The Missionary Herald speculated in late 1917 that of the two million homeless or displaced person in Ottoman territories, a third were orphans (Brand, 2017, The Missionary Herald 1917). The country of Turkey was overwhelmed with refugees and orphans and they had little to no resources to properly caring for the destitute population that was flooding into their borders. This led to another massive wave of Christian missionaries and foreign aid entering into he country. In the midst of war and crisis, there was about one-hundred institutions and orphanages run by Christian missionaries, the majority being Presbyterian, Protestant or from Orthodox beliefs (Brand, 2017). In 1917 Lebanon enlisted upper class Muslim and Christian women, those considered to be Lebanon’s “elite”, to run the orphanages (Brand, 2017). The Lebanese government had hopes that this would lead to better care for children and it would eliminate Christians converting Muslim children and vice versa so that none would lose their national and religious identity.

There seemed to be great inconsistency related to children keeping their national identity and religion, causing a great deal of conflict. Turkey, Lebanon and other countries who were experiencing an orphan crisis were trying to control these orphanages to ensure Muslim children did not convert, while Christian’s were worried their children would be placed in a Muslim context and be converted. Both side became deeply rooted in their own side and tensions escalated with every passing year. Both the Christian and Muslim sides had similar motives and goals yet, racism, religious disagreements and stereotypes of both caused great conflict. Often Armenian and Syrian orphans from Christian backgrounds were placed in Muslim orphanages in

Turkey where their names were changed to Muslim names and they would be stripped of their national identity, often forbidden to use their birth names or native language (Brand, 2017). This act made Christian missionaries only more vigilant to establish Christian orphanages. During this time historians state that Protestant missionaries were using the crisis and genocide of Armenians to gain recognition and converts (Maksudyan, 2014). It was through their recognition spreading and their efforts to help the orphan and displaced that Muslim populations began to grow more and more suspicious of their work. Unfortunately, many of these Protestant missionaries had political agendas and motives that began to be center-fold in many political issues and steadily they became more unpopular. Many stories had begun to circulate about young girls being converted to Islam and experiencing sexual abuse. One Catholic missionary wrote, “it was necessary to provide for these poor little girls, whose parents had disappeared in one way or another during the massacres, and who, completely abandoned or received into Muslim houses, were in danger of losing their faith and innocence” (Maksudyan, 2014).

The resistance to outside influence in orphanages grew stronger as Sultan Abdulhamid II began to fear that the children being raised in a Christian setting would lead to a great withdrawal from the Islamic faith for future generations. But this was not just an issues with Muslims, the Armenian church and differing church denominations began to fear the same thing, no one wanted to see children change faiths and each side became territorial and possessive of their population. The Ottoman administration and Sultan Abdulhamid II began to refer to missionaries as a “herd of locusts” and their successful efforts as missionaries was limiting the power and “reach of the Ottoman Empire”,this made them a threat (Maksudyan, 2014). Sultan Abdulhamid II began to give all his focus and resources to seeing the preservation of Islam in the

Ottoman Empire (Umit, 2014). He established schools called Hamidian Schools and would intentionally place them within missionary territories (Umit, 2014). The non-Muslim population in the empire was expanding and the Muslim population began to realize they would soon be outnumbered if they did stop the work of foreign Christian aid. The Ottoman Empire Porte in Turkey began to take defensive acts against allowing missionaries entrance to hinder missionary activity with children. The government began to report they no longer needed relief or aid as they had enough resources to handle their own orphans, they claimed that any reports of massacres and suffering were not true and over-exaggerated, they began to document that there was no poverty, orphans or crisis in the land (Maksudyan, 2014). This being the beginning of the Middle East's government censorship regarding their children.

In the mid-1900s a key event occurred that was the final strike for Christian run institutions, a scandal occurred in Egypt at a Protestant-run orphanage. In 1933 a Muslim orphan, Turkiyya Hasan, was beaten at the orphanage for being disrespectful to a visiting missionary (Baron, 2014). As her story spread and reached the ears of Islamic activists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, this became the “rallying point” for an end to missionary influence (Womack, 2015). The uprising first began in Egypt but it quickly spread throughout the region, Turkey had already been suspicious and this was all they needed to shut their doors to Christian missionaries. Historian, Beth Baron argues that the battle between Christian missionaries and Muslims over Egyptian children in the 1930s led to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian welfare state (Baron, 2014). The Muslim Brotherhood spread from Egypt all throughout the Arab world and they became key influencers in government decisions and their new policies made. The mission of the Muslim Brotherhood was to see pure Islam instituted

again and that their population would follow the Quran and all commands of the Prophet Muhammed (Bedford Row, 2015). The beginnings of the Islamic Brotherhood were benign but over the years this group has empowered many dangerous extremists and revolutionary regimes who have targeted fatherless boys and children.

Knowing this history helps us understand why there has been so much government censorship and little to no research or statistics about orphans and vulnerable children in the Middle East during the twentieth and twenty-first century. After the scandal in Egypt, the world has grown to know very little about children in the Middle East. Just a few years ago there was little to no research or statistics for orphans. Even today if a government official from a country in the Middle East is asked about the orphans in their country they will respond by saying there are no orphans or they have the situation under control.

The ban of foreign influence, especially of Christian influence on orphans and children has only increased and become more rigid in the passing decades. However, between Desert Storm in the early 2000s and countless large and small conflicts in the region, there has been a small increase in awareness regarding children in the Middle East. The Syrian Civil war has almost completely broken the decades of statistical silence and through the refugee crisis. The United Nations (UN) has deemed the Syrian refugee crisis to be the greatest humanitarian crisis of our generation (United Nations, 2016). Researchers, humanitarian aid relief and organizations have gained first-hand access as eyewitnesses to the reality of children and orphans in the Middle East. As a small door has been opened for foreign aid, not just in Syria but throughout the Middle East, it is crucial that we fully grasp the truth while it is exposed and that we provide sustainable, healthy and honorable solutions for the sake of vulnerable children.

The United Nations released a report in 2016 documenting the hardest countries for children to live in and detailed which countries have the highest number of child rights infractions. Their statistics show that three out five of the worst places are in the region of the Middle East, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen (United Nations, 2016). In 2015 in Afghanistan “the highest number of child casualties was recorded since the United Nations began systematically documenting civilian casualties in 2009” (United Nations, 2016). There has been a rising concern with child abductions in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan by the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), this number is rising annually (United Nations, 2016). Child soldiers have become extremely problematic throughout Iraq and Syria and even more heavily in Afghanistan and Yemen. With the demise of Yemen’s government in 2015, children’s rights and their value have been completely forgotten. Currently, Yemen's Ministry of Defense employs around 20,000 child soldiers (Parker, et. al. 2015). The UN’s research revealed a “fivefold increase” in children being recruited to be armed soldiers (United Nations, 2016). The capital of Yemen, Sanaa, is anticipated to be the first country with a capital that will completely run out of water, this leaves the entire population in famine and at great risk of a major drought. Not only that, but often government officials, Islamic extremists and traffickers use water as a means of manipulation for children (Parker, et. al. 2015). Yemen has been in conflict with Saudi Arabia and with different races and groups within their own borders. As of 2016 eighty-nine percent of child mortalities have been due to bombings and ground conflicts (United Nations, 2016). Children are frequently captured, held as slaves and deprived of all freedom and liberty. The issues of sexual violence against children is believed to be completely unreported, in 2016 only one case was reported. Schools and hospitals have been

frequently targeted in air raids leaving children at risk every time they attend school and limiting their right to an education.

Life for children in Afghanistan is dismal, the cultural norm is that children are regularly beaten. Girls typically have it worse, especially Pashtun girls who are raised under the Taliban. Girls can expect to be beaten regularly by their fathers, brothers and mothers (UNICEF, CSO, 2013). Girls are typically already married around fifteen to eighteen years old, many Pashtun girls can be married off even younger, once the marriage is arranged a girl will go live with her husbands family where she can anticipate abuse and beatings from his family as well (UNICEF, CSO 2013). Girls and women are not honored or valued, many women under the Taliban are at risk of intense violence if they become pregnant with a girl. One woman shared a story that when she found out she was pregnant at eighteen years old with a little girl her mother in-law commanded her son to beat her until the baby died, this happened on several occasions when she became pregnant with a girl. Domestic abuse is widely accepted and culturally appropriate in Afghanistan leaving children, young girls and especially orphans extremely vulnerable. One out every four deaths in Afghanistan during 2015 was a child, the Taliban continually recruits children for combat and suicide bombings and an average of fifty-three children die weekly (United Nations, 2016). There are many organizations and some government employees working towards implementing children's rights in Afghanistan, but the work is extremely dangerous. It is not uncommon for humanitarian aid workers fighting for children's protection to be abducted. As of 2015 a hundred workers were abducted and nine killed, these are only the reported and known cases (United Nations, 2016).

The rise of ISIS has left both Syria and Iraq's children traumatized and vulnerable. Children of Kurdish, Yazidi or Christian descent have been systematically targeted by ISIS, as they are viewed as less than and are minorities in the Middle East. Girls and boys were abducted, tortured, used as slaves and many girls sold or used as a bribe under ISIS rule (Parker, et. al. 2015). ISIS has been completely ruthless to children, often crucifying them for not fasting during the Muslim holiday of Ramadan (Dearden, 2015). In 2015 a twelve-year-old Christian boy was tortured and crucified along with his father (Webb, 2015), and children with special needs have been targeted to be suicide bombers (Buncombe, 2015). The children who have survived under the rule of ISIS are at serious risk mentally, emotionally and physically from severe trauma and toxic stress. One doctor who has worked and researched Syrian children has coined a new term for their mental and emotional state, Human Devastation Syndrome (Hamza, 2018). He writes, "the Syrian tragedy is an unceasing nightmare. It is vicious and has taken over the lives of millions for seven horrific years, diminishing human dignity, wellbeing, morality, and hope. The humiliation reaches into the core of one's own being and existence. It radiates its agony and grief to the hearts of a collapsed nation" (Hamza, 2018). In his research he has found and proven that these children are far beyond any type of toxic stress or post-traumatic stress disorder we've known thus far, he states that to properly care for and treat these children we must have a sober and realistic understanding of what the children are living with (Hamza, 2018).

Children in Syria have faced two great forces of power and violence, ISIS (the Muslim Brotherhood has been a key supporter in the rise of ISIS) and the Assad regime. UNICEF's executive director, Henrietta Fore, released a statement explaining that more children died in 2018 than in any previous year at the hands of both ISIS and the Assad regime (Fore, 2019). The

UN verified that at least one-thousand children perished in the war in 2018, but the actual number is likely to be much higher (Fore, 2019). Hundreds of children remain trapped in “no man's land,” where they are separated from their parents or suffering from injuries with no home and little to no safety in sight. We are now approaching the ninth year of the civil war and Syrian children continue to suffer extensively, the number of orphans in Syria is rising weekly as violence continues. It is challenging to get a solid statistic on the number of Syrian orphans because the war is currently happening, but some estimate the number of orphans to be close to a million (Javaid, 2017), while others estimate it to be closer to 150,000 (Pelley, 2018). Currently, the number is unknown but most can agree that it is more than we would expect.

There are still no firm statistics for the exact number of orphans in the Middle East or for individual countries. However, through rising war and conflict we are slowly getting a better grasp on how serious the situation is for these orphans and vulnerable children. This is just an overview of a few countries within the region of the Middle East who have children that are in dire situations. Though this paper only focused specifically on Turkey, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan we ought to consider the other countries as well. The other nine countries within the Middle East, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and Iran, hundreds to thousands of vulnerable children and orphans. We cannot forget the young boys and girls who are persecuted, trafficked, beaten, enslaved, violated, manipulated, assaulted and abandoned. There are children in Iran stuck in poverty and child labor, child slaves in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, those who are fighting in Israel as the war between Palestinians and Jews rages on. The orphan count is increasing daily in Israel as mothers and fathers are dying in protests and battles and every day children are caught in the crossfire of war. These are

the children whose voices have yet to be heard, whose tears have yet to be seen by the world. Syrian and Iraqi children suffered and were at risk long before ISIS and the Syrian Civil war, only now a small light has shone on them and the eyes of the world have been opened just a bit more.

Though most of these countries profess social protection policies for their children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Arab Charter on Human Rights, many governments do not have the resources to implement such things. The consistent wars and crisis's in the region it makes it difficult to actively uphold these policies (UN General Assembly, 2000). Some governments desire to see the protection and human rights of their children fully established but many countries populations are simply trying to survive.

May the orphan and vulnerable child in the Middle East be given a voice, may the tears shed from fear, loss, suffering and trauma be seen by this generation. For us to activate and implement change we must first know, once we know the history and the current situation we can come together to create sustainable changes and programs that are always for the benefit of the child. It has been said many times that children are the future, but looking across the history of children and the current state of children in the Middle East one can assess that not just the future for these children but the future of the Middle East, is at risk of being lost (McDonald, 2017).

There is no better way to conclude than with the voices of these children. An organization, Save the Children, recently put together a poem titled "Listen to Our Voices", each line was written by a child of war from the Middle East, Africa and Asia. "Before conflict, we had peace. Before conflict, we could be children. School was a place of learning and

development, and where our voices were heard. The streets were full of joy and happiness, where we walked and played. We remember a life without conflict. And we know a childhood in peace is possible. But today we are paying the price for adults' war. We are scared. Our playground has been transformed into a dangerous place. We hide under our kitchen table. We hear gunshots, bombs and explosions. We are forced to quit school and leave our home. Many of us have lost our parents, brothers, sisters and neighbors. We are forced to work, beg or even kill to survive. We marry as children and give birth to children. We have been tortured, kidnapped, raped and silenced. We feel anger, resentment, and sadness. We go to bed hungry. Some of us never wake up. Our present and future have been put on hold. Do not silence our words and our dreams. Listen to what we have to say. Listen to our opinions. We want the war to stop – we don't want to hear a single shot. Let's make the past the bridge to our future. We have big dreams for ourselves and our countries. We imagine our countries in peace, where we are put at the heart of all decisions – because we are our countries' present and future. Even during war, we dream of a country where all children can walk safely in their neighborhood, and go to a school free from violence. A place with cinemas and parks – and electricity, so we can watch TV. All this should be not only in our dreams, but in reality. All this is our right. As leaders, you have this duty to fulfill. We call on the world's leaders to ensure we are able to go to school, play and feel protected... in every circumstance. We ask leaders to change weapons for books, bullets for pencils, confrontations for games, cries for smiles, and hatred for love. We ask leaders to put a smile on every child's face. We ask leaders to turn to peace, to pledge to protect us and promise us development. We ask leaders to offer us the opportunities that will enable us to become the

best versions of ourselves. Our common future is at risk. We demand that you act now” (Save the Children, 2019).

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