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Orphans and Vulnerable Children in the Middle East

The state of orphans and vulnerable children in the Middle East has remained somewhat unknown or ambiguous, in recent years we are beginning to learn the dire state of children within the region. In this paper we will look at specific Middle Eastern countries, latest statistics and current humanitarian or child rights laws and whether or not they are being implemented in said country.

Between the end of the twentieth century leading into the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Middle East made great progress in establishing and implementing child rights. The region began promoting health, rights and policy changes that would protect and be for the benefit of children. 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. 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.

Brief History

Understanding the history of orphans and vulnerable children in the Middle East is pertinent in grasping the current situation. 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 as orphans were typically being sold as slaves, servants to the upper class and many were used as sex-slaves (Maksudyan, 2014). Children who were destitute or on the streets would be kidnapped, killed, used in battle, sold or taken to other countries. Missionaries became aware of these children and began to get more involved in the

lives of orphans. A social concern emerged 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 these institutions was “to improve and reform” children in the Ottoman Empire (Maksudyan, 2014). This layout for orphan care focused on continuing to educate and raise children in the Ottoman Empire in the ways of Islam. 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 mistreated.

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 process of shutting down any foreign run orphanages in the region. 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 the 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.

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. 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 begun to break the decades of statistical silence and through the refugee crisis.

Overview of Children in the Middle East

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 of 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 has remained dismal for decades due to continued conflict. Children are often beaten and abused, girls typically experience this at a heightened level. Girls can expect to be beaten regularly by their fathers, brothers, mothers, husbands and in-laws (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 husband's 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). Thousands of Afghans have fled their homes in hopes for a better life and many have become stranded on the island of Lesbos, Greece in Moria camp with little hope of resettlement. 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 and terror 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). Today, extremist groups continue to target vulnerable children as they are more susceptible. Al-hol camp in Syria is filled with child soldiers of ISIS are currently imprisoned, there are small projects to try and rehabilitate these young boys but the efforts are far and few between. Other children remain trapped and separated from their families in this camp which is predominately ISIS families or followers, this is creating another highly susceptible group of children.

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.

The terror of ISIS and the civil war in Syria, conflict in Afghanistan and Yemen have negatively changed the infrastructure of the Middle East region. Syrian, Afghan and Yemeni children have lost basic human rights as they have been forced into displacement and now many other children in the region are not receiving their basic human rights. Often unaccompanied refugee minors are wrongly detained and mistreated by law enforcement. Children who are refugees or are fleeing are rarely covered by national social protection legal frameworks, leading to situations where they have no legal standing and are vulnerable and at risk. Child abuse (rape, beating, physical and sexual assault) is rarely reported as it has become a social norm leading to an unknown statistic of who has been affected and victims remain untreated. Abuse of children

has increased due to stress on adults from war, economic and political strain (McDonald, 2017). Because of a male dominance mindset as abuse increases it is unlikely to be reported.

One out of every ten Syrian refugee child is engaged in child labor in Lebanon alone, most of them have never attended school, many of them are male. Six percent of these children experience sexual or physical abuse and through the influx of refugees into Lebanon the country has fallen below the poverty line (Parker, Patel, Watson, Karakashian, Washington, Khalawi, 2015). In Egypt during 2014, 120,000 Syrian refugees faced detention, deportation and imprisonment, this left them at high risk of abuse, trafficking and cruelty, especially girls. Two hundred and twenty Syrian refugee children were detained for weeks without charge and one hundred twenty-five of them were deported without cause (Parker, et al, 2015).

Child Rights in the Middle East

The Middle East ratified the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (UN, 2000). The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have a voice and are entitled to basic human rights such as health care, a good standard of living, and education. It also ratifies the protection of children from violence, economic exploitation, sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking.

Though the countries in the Middle East have signed amendments for human and child rights via the Convention on the Rights of the Child it would seem many of the articles and laws have yet to be enacted upon. In the past decade there have been improved advances made for child rights in the region, but with the rise of conflict and government instability, there has been a reversal regarding children's well-being (Bilo, Mechado, 2018). Countries that have faced conflict, war, famine or governmental disruption have to readjust to make new social policies, this typically leaves children at the bottom of their priority list. Social protection is crucial in the process of enacting and ratifying policies and providing social protection for children in the Middle East. "Social protection is most commonly conceptualized as a set of interventions that

aim to reduce and eliminate poverty, vulnerability and risk...UNICEF has adopted a working definition that focused more specifically on children by focusing on public and private policies and programs aimed at reducing and eliminating the economic and social vulnerabilities of children, women and families in order to ensure their rights to a decent standard of living and essential services (UNICEF, 2011)” (Marcus, Perezniето, Cullen, Jones, 2011). UNICEF’s work regarding social protection aims at “preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse and unnecessary separation from family (UNICEF, 2011). Social protection helps to build a protective environment for children by ‘reducing the socio-economic barriers to child protection’ (ibid) through policies that contribute to economic security, ensure access to basic social services and contribute to preventing violence and exploitation. (Bilo, Mechado, 2018). Though many of the countries in the Middle East vocalize a right to social protection and a good atmosphere of living for children, as mentioned above, the living conditions for children currently are not good and there is a discrepancy between what is vocalized in such policies and what is actively being enforced.

There is work being done to see that child rights are more emphasized within the Arab Charter of Human Rights (Arab Charter of Human Rights, 2004) so that a new standard would be set for the region; the charter does refer to some of a child’s rights and what is prohibited, yet there are organizations that want to see these articles have greater detail and enforcement.

Through conflict a door has been opened in the Middle East for organizations to be able to enter in to help create some structure, implement change and see policies fulfilled. In countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia or Turkey statistics an information regarding children is extremely limited. UNICEF is working hard to see humanitarian action that strengthens children, enforces monitoring of children, investing in national child protection policies, educating the world and providing reliable research and evidence (Obadi, 2017). Save the Children has a goal called Closing the Gap, Theory of Change, which focuses upon helping children survive, be protected and receive their right to an education (Save the Children, 2019). Though there are still no firm statistics for the exact number of orphans in the Middle East or for individual countries, through war and conflict we are slowly getting a better grasp on how

serious the situation is for these orphans and vulnerable children. Hope is not lost for the children in the Middle East, through more organizations, the United Nations and government support a high focus can be put upon child protection policies. There is an acceleration in seeing change implemented in this region because of intense conflict and trauma these children have faced. As the situation has declined governments and agencies can no longer dispute the importance of child protection and that action needs to be taken.

The topic of children in the Middle East and the policies surrounding them is deeply personal to me. I have spent significant amounts of time throughout the Middle East, in refugee camps, with Syrian, Kurdish, Iraqi, Afghan and Iranian refugees. Their stories and lives have changed me. Time and time again I have looked into the eyes of men and women and children who are traumatized and seem to be forgotten by their governments and the world. My life's vision is to see every abandoned, neglected and orphaned child within this region placed within a family. I believe it is a child's basic human right to grow up in a safe place with a family. Children are the key to the future of countries, in a poem written by children in this region they express, "We imagine our countries in peace, where we are put at the heart of all decisions - because we are our countries present and future" (Save the Children, 2019). To see a generation, who will be the next leaders and decision makers, grow up with loving and safe families can influence change on the future of these conflict zones.

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