activity of Iraqi women residing in the US in comparison with those based in the UK. Aside from the scarcity of independent women’s organisations in the US – independent both from the US government and from Iraqi political parties – what has struck me most so far is the relatively narrow political spectrum of Iraqi activism within the US in contrast to the far ranging spectrum both in terms of political views and forms of mobilisation and activism found in the UK. While ethnic and religious divisions exist in both the US and Britain, the large presence of secular political parties in Britain, such as the Iraqi Communist Party and Iraqi National Accord, have contributed to the building of more non-sectarian alliances and organisations. Moreover, the post-September 11 climate in the USA has limited the political spaces and resources available for those not in agreement with US Middle East policy. Several Iraqi women interviewed in the US mentioned their fear of expressing dissent from US policy, even more so following the stringent Patriot Act of 2001. By contrast, a thriving civil society of Arab dissidents and intellectuals as well as a strong anti-war/peace movement and a diverse women’s movement have constituted the backdrop against which Iraqi women’s organisations and individual activists have flourished in Britain – where there are up to 300,000 Iraqis.

The threat of Islamist militias now goes beyond dress codes and calls for gender segregation at university. Despite, indeed partly because of, the US and British rhetoric about liberation and rights, women have been pushed into the background and into their homes. Women with a public profile (doctors, academics, lawyers, NGO activists, politicians) are threatened and targeted for assassination. There are also criminal gangs who worsen the climate of fear by kidnapping women for ransom, sexual abuse or sale into prostitution outside Iraq.

It is no surprise that many of the women I interviewed remember the past nostalgically.

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Iraq’s children pay the price of war

Iraq’s ruinous wars, crippling sanctions and ongoing violence have had a devastating effect on children. Shootings and bombings have killed, injured and orphaned thousands but the biggest killer is illness transmitted through unclean water and exacerbated by under-nutrition.

In a statement made on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Olara Otunnu, the then Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, stressed that “the children of Iraq are innocent, and all parties must make their protection an absolute priority... we must now begin to put in place plans to ensure that the well-being, rehabilitation and development of the children of Iraq will constitute a central aspect of any programmes for post-conflict recovery and reconstruction.”

This has not happened. One in eight Iraqi children dies before their fifth birthday. Nine per cent are acutely malnourished – double the number prior to 2003. Hundreds of schools have been attacked and teachers killed. Unexploded ordinance and mines litter the country. Children are injured on dumps looking for metal to sell to help support their families. Thousands of homeless children survive by begging, stealing or scavenging in garbage for food. There has been a marked increase in rates of childhood leukaemia as a result of exposure to radiation from cluster bombs, the high use of chemicals in agriculture and water contamination.

The NGO War Child recently interviewed some 400 children in southern Iraq. Research also involved talking to the children’s families, to local community members and to those working with vulnerable and...
marginalised children. Role-playing, social-drama activities and drawing encouraged children to map out their daily lives. Asked to rank their problems, they cited poverty, family breakdown, terrorism and lack of security as their primary concerns.

Our results showed how conflict is leading to the increased criminalisation and stigmatisation of children. We are witnessing high levels of family breakdown and an increase of female-headed households. Children are being forced to assume income-generating roles because their families are suffering from acute poverty. That means children leaving school, going out on to the streets in search of work and becoming exposed to illegal livelihood activities. Boys and girls are engaging in sex work, selling weapons, alcohol, drugs and pornography. Out of economic necessity children as young as eight are becoming involved in such enterprises. Branded as ‘bad children’ they are stigmatised and subject to social exclusion. Many are dependent on marihuana or inhale solvents.

Many of the families we spoke to during the course of this research wished that they had another option and did not have to put their children in danger. But some children we spoke to said their families have been the primary perpetrators of abuse against them. Some young boys and girls said that parents or members of their extended families had forced them to engage in sex work. The family, as well as being a force that protects, can also be a force that causes extreme forms of abuse.

Children are surrounded by violence and insecurity on a daily basis which has an adverse effect on their behaviour and psychological development. It is quite common for Iraqi kids to be playing with guns and to demonstrate the violent behaviour they see about them on a daily basis. Quite a few of the children that we spoke to, particularly the boys forced to engage in sex work, carry knives to protect themselves. Some of them display aggressive behaviour as a kind of protection mechanism. They are trying to say: “Look, don’t mess with me; I’m capable of defending myself.” But, deep down, I think we are dealing with quite scared children.

War Child has existed since the war in former Yugoslavia. Our experience shows us the way forward is to first involve communities in trying to break down the stigma that these children have. If the community is on board, you can really help to promote a protective environment for the children themselves. The key to community involvement is reaching those community leaders, mullahs and other authority figures and using them as a way of mobilising the rest of the population.

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