

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# EFFECTS OF UNSTABLE DAILY LIFE ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH IN BAGHDAD CITY, IRAQ: QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The unstable living situation in Iraq in the last 10 years after 2003 war affected the daily life of most Iraqis, and especially the children. The objective of this study was to explore the effects of an unstable living environment on children's health. A community-based qualitative study was done to collect data from 20 mothers of children (age 7 to 8 years old) through in-depth interview (IDI). Data was recorded using tape recorders and was later transcribed and analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis techniques. The majority of mothers interviewed said the past nine years of unstable security in the capital had affected their daily life; some mothers also expressed concern about their child's nutritional status, their eating habits during the school day, and the unhealthy food being sold at school canteens. As a conclusion, the unstable living situations in Baghdad city after the last war had affected the cognitive and nutritional development of children. More precautions should be taken by parents to ensure their children safety in the future.

**Keywords:** Mothers, Baghdad City, Iraq, Unstable Living Situation, Children.

## INTRODUCTION

Iraq is a developing country faced several problems in the last 30 years, starting by war for 8 years in the 80's then economic sanctions for 13 years and the 2003 war and finally 10 years of unstable security situation especially in the capital city Baghdad. Living in unstable situation on daily basis can affect the whole family but when the victims are children the damage can be more. The effects may not be physical alone but also mentally which is the most important as it can have a long-term effects on child development.

The conflict has led households exposed to violence and killings, limit their access to health care services, unstable electricity supply, declining of drinking water availability and sewage systems, lack of enough food and to disrupt households' daily life <sup>1</sup>.

Data from a cross-sectional study in city of Mosul, in the northern part of Iraq, revealed that mental disorders were found among 37.4% of children and adolescent patients attending primary health care (PHC) facilities. The most common disorders included post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (10.5%), non-organic enuresis (6%), and separation anxiety disorder (4.3%). Depression was reported in only 1.5% cases. Additionally, there were 9.4% cases of co-morbidity (PTSD and depression) <sup>2</sup>.

Another study done at Nassiriya, a city in southern Iraq in 2006 concluded that attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was found among 15% of school children <sup>3</sup>. Al-Obaidi et al. 2009 <sup>4</sup> in their study at the child psychiatric department of a general paediatric hospital in Baghdad city during 2005, found the distribution of mental disorder among children included: anxiety disorders (22%), behavioural problems (hyperkinetic and conduct disorders) (18%), non-organic enuresis (15%), stuttering (14%), epilepsy (10%) and depression (1.3%).

On the impacts of conflict on children health, Bundervoet et al. <sup>5</sup> study the effects of the civil war in rural Burundi and they concluded that children born in provinces affected by the war had on average 0.5 standard deviations lower height-for-age Z scores than non-exposed children. Further more another

study done by Akresh and Verwimp<sup>6</sup> found that girls had 0.72 standard deviations lower in their height-for-age Z scores. The aim of this study was to explore the effects of an unstable living environment on children's nutrition and cognition functions.

## METHODS

A community-based in-depth interview (IDI) of primary school children mothers was conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of unstable living situation in Iraq and especially in Baghdad on the children's health. A qualitative descriptive approach was adopted because it was found to be most suitable in generating a comprehensive understanding of the effects on daily life. The data used for this paper was collected as part of a bigger study whose results have been published elsewhere<sup>7,8</sup>. The qualitative data was collected using IDI technique.

The study was conducted in Baghdad city which is the capital of Iraq, five primary schools were chosen randomly from each educational area in Baghdad. The 20 mothers were selected by Convenience Sampling then 4 mothers were chosen randomly from each school during the monthly meeting with parents at school. To be recruited in our study, participant had to meet the following inclusion criteria: their children currently aged 7-8 years old; and willing to participate in IDI. Data were collected during September and October 2011.

An audio-taped in-depth interview was done individually by the researcher. The average time for each respondent was 30-45 minutes. The language of the interview was Arabic then each respondent verbatim was done in Arabic and then translated to English and back to Arabic language again for validation, this process was done by language expert.

The interview explored the following items:

- How the unstable security situation affect your family daily life?
- Do you concern about your child nutrition at school?
- Did your child face any problem or situation like (trauma, explosion, loss of father or mother) in the past 7 years? Explain.
- Do you think your child's nutrition is good?
- Do you follow your child's academic performance at school?

## RESULTS

The total number of the qualitative study participants was 20 mothers with age range from 29 to 45 years old. Most of the mothers were married (90%). Exactly half of the mothers were not working (housewives), 35% worked in the government sector and only 15% worked in the private sector. Education of the mothers was good with 40% have secondary school degrees and 35% have university degrees as shown in table 1.

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics for qualitative study participants**

	N	%
<b>Age</b>		
20-30	1	5
30-40	14	70
>40	5	25
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	18	90
Divorced	2	10
<b>Occupation</b>		
Housewife	10	50
Government	7	35
Private	3	15
<b>Educational level</b>		
Illiterate	1	5
Primary	3	15
Secondary	8	40
University	8	40

Twelve themes emerged from the in-depth interviews with the respondents' mothers as shown in table 2.

**Table 2 Themes emerged from Qualitative study**

No.	Category	Themes
1	The effects of unstable security situation on the respondents' family daily life	1. Psychological effects on the Iraqi families 2. Relocation to other living areas 3. Minimal or no effect on daily life
2	Children nutrition at school	4. No control on food quality 5. Food prepared at home 6. Instruction given to children not to buy from school canteen
3	Children facing any problem or situation like trauma, explosion, loss of father or mother in the past 8 years	7. Psychological effects from death of family relatives 8. Children did not face any problem
4	Children's nutritional status	9. Children nutrition is good 10. Nutrition is not good as they consumed a lot of carbonated drinks
5	Children's academic performance at school	11. Cannot follow because of time restriction 12. Follow and attend monthly meeting at school

**Category I: The effects of unstable security situation on the respondents' family daily life.**

Ten participants (50%) reported the unstable security situation affected their

family daily life especially the psychological effects. Five participants (25%) said that because of the situation, they had to leave their homes and were relocated to other safer area; three

participants (15%) reported the security situation affected their social life so much; two participants (10%) said the effect of unstable security situation on their lives was minimal.

### **Theme 1: Psychological effects on the Iraqis families**

The psychological effects of the unstable security situation on the Iraqis in the last 9 years were large especially in the capital city Baghdad.

As explained by majority of the respondents' mothers:

*"The unstable security situation affects the psychological part of my family." (R 4).*

*"The most important effects of the unstable security situation was on my family psychology, my children motivation to play outside the house decreased" (R11).*

### **Theme 2: Relocation to other living areas**

The unstable security situation may enforce some families to leave their houses and relocate to other safer areas of Baghdad city, because of the violence and threats of killing that force them to leave.

*"Because of the unstable security situation, we left our house and relocate to another area, so we left our neighbours and friends, and that caused psychological problems to us" (R 15).*

*"We received a letter of threat to leave our house or get killed, so we left it and went to our relatives house in another faraway area" (R10).*

### **Theme 3: Minimal or no effect on daily life**

Some of the respondents' mothers said there was a minimal or no effect of the unstable security situation on their daily life. It may be related to the fact that their living area is considered safe during the last eight years as minimal problems had happened there.

*"The impact of the security situation was minimal on our daily lives." (R8).*

### **Category II: Child nutrition at school**

Thirteen respondents (65%) said that they are worried about their child eating habits at school because there is no control on food quality. Seven respondents (35%) said that they are not concerned with their child eating habits at school because they prepared food at home for their children before going to school and asked them not to buy any food from school canteen.

### **Theme 1: No control on food quality**

The interviewed mothers agreed there is no quality control on the food entering Iraq and as a result, the food available at school canteen of no nutritional values.

*"Because of the lacking of control of food entering the country, I am afraid of the food available at the canteen" (R19).*

*"The school principals had no control on what the canteen are selling to the children" (R1).*

### **Theme 2: Food prepared at home**

Some of the families prepared the food at home for their children to eat at school.

*"No, I don't worry about my child nutrition at school because I already prepared him the food at home but sometimes he need water so he buy it from the school canteen." (R 5).*

*"I prepared the sandwich to my child before going to school so no need to buy from the canteen"(R 2).*

*" I give sandwich to my children, also one juice and one apple to eat at school" ( R 17).*

### **Theme 3: Instruction given to children not to buy from school canteen**

Some families give instructions to their children about not buying any food from the canteen.

*" I told my child everyday not to buy anything from school canteen" ( R 6).*

**Category III: Children face any problem or situation like trauma, explosion, loss of father or mother in the past 8 years**

Eighteen respondents (90%) reported that their children did not face any problem during the last 7 years; two respondents (10%) said that their children lost first-degree relatives.

**Theme 1: Psychological effects from death of family relatives**

Some of the children faced some psychological events such as the death of family relatives.

*“My child witnessed the death of his grandmother and that affected him psychologically.”* (R 9).

**Theme 2: Children did not face any problem**

Majority of the interviewed mothers said that their children did not face any type of explosions or traumatic events.

*“No, my child didn’t face any problem during the last 7 years, Alhamdulillah.”* (R 12).

*“ My children did not witness any explosions, Alhamdulillah”* (R 5).

**Category IV: Children’s nutritional status**

Seventeen respondents (85%) said that their child’s nutritional status is good, two respondents (10%) said that their child nutritional status is slightly better, one respondent (5 %) said that her child nutrition is not good at all.

**Theme 1: Children nutrition is good**

Majority of the mothers said that their children nutritional status is good.

*“Yes, my child nutrition is good, he ate many of vegetables and fruits.”* (R 14 ).

*“ My child nutrition is good , his weight is good”* ( R 13).

**Theme 2: Nutrition is not good as they consumed a lot of carbonated drinks**

Children consuming a lot of carbonated drinks and potato chips at school became a concern of some mothers.

*“I think my child nutrition is not so good because she drinks many of carbonated drinks and potato chips”* (R 19).

**Category V: Children academic performance at school**

Eighteen respondents (90%) reported that they followed their child’s academic performance on daily basis and they attended the monthly meeting with the teachers at school, two respondents said that they do not follow their child’s performance at school because of time limit.

**Theme 1: Cannot follow because of time restriction**

Some mothers said that because of time limit and working every day, they cannot attend the monthly meeting with parents at school.

*“No, I don’t follow my child academic performance because I returned very late from my work and I don’t have time to do that”* (R 14).

*“I cannot follow my child’s academic performance at school because of working”* (R 7).

**Theme 2: Follow and attend monthly meeting at school**

Majority of the mothers follow the academic performance of their children, and check the daily homework of their children.

*“Yes, I follow my child performance continuously and his marks for the last exam was good and I also attend the meeting at school routinely”* (R 11).

*“I follow my child performance at school daily and check his homework every day”* (R 16).

**DISCUSSION**

The daily life of Iraqi families especially in the capital city Baghdad had been affected in the last 10 years following the 2003 war. The main finding of our study according to result from the children’s mothers, is that children nutrition is not good, lack of control on food quality especially at school canteen



is big concern to parents, the unstable security situation affected the social life of Iraqi families and the children to get more socialize with their colleagues.

The limitation of our study, it is a qualitative study; the sample was neither representative of the entire population of primary school children's mothers in Baghdad city and did not have fathers and other guardians who take care of the children other than mothers. But these results were supported by the quantitative study findings<sup>7,8</sup> done among 529 primary school children in Baghdad city Iraq and found that under-nutrition prevalence was 12.1 % and children IQ score were affected by the unstable security situation.

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies stated in their (2010) report by Cordesman et al.<sup>9</sup> that "There are a wide range of indicators that show the level of violence in Iraq has dropped sharply since the year 2006, the average number of security incidents between September and November 2009 was only half that of the same period in 2008." In addition, the Oxford Research Group Security Report by Rogers in (2008)<sup>10</sup> concluded that most of the available evidence supports the view that security within Iraq has substantially improved, but there is still endemic violence, especially in the capital city of Baghdad.

A possible reason for this improvement in the security situation in Baghdad, the number of dead bodies on the streets, gunshots and explosions has decreased dramatically. According to the Iraqi body count project (2011)<sup>11</sup>, which recorded Iraqi violence-related deaths during 2003-2011, there was a dramatic decrease of more than 70% in the number of deaths in the 2010-2011 period compared with 2006-2008.

Additionally, Tol et al. (2009)<sup>12</sup> noted that exposure to violence is a risk factor

for adverse outcomes of child development in low-income settings, and that childhood mental health problems are difficult to address within the contexts of ongoing poverty and political instability. Many studies been done in Middle East region as it considered a conflict zone for many decades<sup>13</sup>. Children living in conflict zone can express acute distress from various traumatic events through emotional problems that are not usually recognized according to a study done by Thabet et al. (2002)<sup>14</sup> among Palestinian children living in a war zone.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the qualitative study supported what has been discovered from quantitative study. The majority of mothers interviewed said the past nine years of unstable security in the capital had affected their daily life; some mothers also expressed concern about their child's nutritional status, their eating habits during the school day, and the unhealthy food being sold at school canteens.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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