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Middle Eastern Children Are the Main Victims of the Ongoing Conflicts

Natalia Rogozhina

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It should be made perfectly clear that armed conflicts are not simply leading to high death rates among minors, but they also inflict irreparable harm to those minors that survived the carnage. The whole Middle East may be labeled as a highly hazardous area due to the continuous bombing of the region. The United States alone has dropped more than 25 tones of ordinance on this region in 2015. As bombs, shells and rockets go off, the environment is becoming heavily polluted with neurotoxic substances and metals that are extremely harmful to one's health. It should hardly be a surprise to anyone that children and pregnant women are particularly susceptible to such substances.

An article in the Environmental Monitoring and Assessment scientific journal would point out that shells and bombs affect a considerably larger area than the direct impact, putting civilians at risk of contracting incurable diseases. As it's been noted by Mozghan Savabieasfahani, who is a regular contributor to this journal, as bombs begin pouring down in a certain area, the number of birth defects among newborns starts to rise rapidly in that same region. For instance, the Iraqi city of Basra saw a 13% increase in the number of children born with defects in May 2010, then in just a few months this figure rose to 30%. Mozghan is convinced that this rise can be attributed to the fact that people started inhaling toxic substances produced by all sorts of ammunition that was dropped on this town.

Various kinds of ammunition are far from the only source of danger for civilians in modern conflicts, since there are less obvious but no less dangerous environmental threats. In particular, scientists have established a direct link between toxic emissions and US Army waste utilization protocols in Iraq. This conclusion was made on the basis of toxicological studies of tissue samples taken from Iraqi children with birth defects and their parents, which showed a significant excess of lead, mercury and titanium in their bloodstreams. Such levels may lead to deafness, blood cancer, and various lung diseases.

It should be noted that there's over 500 US military facilities in the Middle East today, with this number reaching a staggering 1,500 back in 2003. Most of these facilities adopted a fairly convenient manner of disposing garbage, used equipment and other waste by simply burning it. Therefore, heavy metals and other harmful substances have been spread across the region along with the black smoke they produced, inflicting irreparable harm to local communities and their children.

According to eyewitness reports of those American soldiers who fought in Iraq, carefully documented by a former US naval officer Joseph Hickman in his book *The Burn Pits*, enormous pits are used by US military personnel to burn everything, ranging from electronic equipment, metal cans and rubber tires, to munitions, explosives, batteries, excrement, animal bones and skins. It goes without saying that those practices break every environmental or safety standard known.

The toxic black smoke produced by these illegal dumps, some of which are still burning today, eventually reaches residential areas and starts poisoning local populations. One such garbage dump near the Iraqi city of Balad was used to burn up to 50 tons of waste a day.

As the war carries on, it continues claiming new victims, most of which will never be reported, including those that need protection the most – children. They are supposed to be the future of the Middle East and yet they are the primary victims of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. And it would be too narrow-minded to count as victims only those deceased and injured, since there are those mentally crippled, as well as deprived of parents and home. According to UNICEF's latest report that was published under the title *A Heavy Price for Children: Violence Destroys Childhoods in Iraq*, every fifth child in Iraq is subjected to the threat of death, physical injury, sexual abuse and forced enlistment in one of Iraq's many armed groups. Since 2014, according to this international organization, 838 children were killed, 794 wounded, 1,496 abducted, while a total of 1.5 million children were displaced. Moreover, 575,000 more were

forced to seek employment. Due to the loss of those who can bring food, families are forcing girls under 15 years old to get married. The number of early marriages has doubled in Iraq since 1990. More than 3.5 million school-age children do not receive any education. In total, one third of all children in Iraq, which constitutes the mind-boggling number of 4.7 million, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

Of course, the consequences of the tragic events in the Middle East will continue manifesting themselves for decades to come. Today's children of Iraq and other Middle East countries suffering from the devastating effects of wars are the future politicians, doctors, nurses, lawyers, workers, farmers, scientists and engineers of the region. If we fail today in protecting and educating these children, future social and economic losses will cripple the development of the entire region. That is why the international community must unite to put an end to all sorts of violence in the Middle East.
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