

KURDISTAN REVISITED
A psychosocial study of child survivors of Anfal

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OUTLINE

Between the 20th of June and the 26th of August 1993, I traveled in the liberated area of Iraqi Kurdistan to investigate the situation for the survivors of the genocide operations "Al-Anfal", by making a survey on the Sumood complex in Kalar in Sulaymaniya Governorate and that of Gejnikan in the Governorate of Erbil for the Qandil Project (a Swedish program for development in Iraqi Kurdistan).

The study was accomplished in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in the Kurdistan Regional Government and with other local authorities in the liberated area of Iraqi Kurdistan. The collected data consisted of structured interviews with children and adults regarding their experiences of psychological trauma, children's drawings and descriptions of their life events and family analysis of some randomly selected families in different groups. The data are collected in form of standardized questionnaires, mini-tapes, video films, slides and photographs, in addition to information about housing, schools, health situation, medical service and the economic situation of the people in the studies.

The lecture focuses on the strategic significance of the results of the study presenting suggestions for further research and rehabilitation programs

INTRODUCTION

HAWAR PROGRAMME

The first trial project to investigate and manage child mental health disorders and the consequences of childhood trauma in the Kurdish society was started in Duhok on July 1992 (HAWAR, 1992; Tayeeb & Ahmad, 1993). During 1992 – 1993, the medical and the health care systems in the Kurdistan region of Iraq were suffering from adversities and set-backs, which negatively affected the HAWAR Programme too. Especially regarding the Primary Care System, a shortage of drug supply, difficulties in transport and communication and the lack of supporting aids to the already exhausted medical personnel resulted in a further shrinkage in the medical care instead of the progress that supposed to happen after the young Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in the local Kurdish Government was to take over the total responsibility for the medical and health care in the liberated area of Kurdistan from the Central Government in Baghdad. The main reason being the lack of resources due to the double blockade on Kurdistan, both from Baghdad Regime and from UN, as the liberated area of Kurdistan was still officially considered as a part of Iraq. Besides, the Qandil Project was not able to fully support the HAWAR Programme according to the "Working Plan" agreement (Ameen, Ahmad & Tayeeb, 1992), because of the financial difficulties and taking other priorities to support.

However, in attempt to integrate the HAWAR Programme in the Primary Care System, we were able to find out four Primary Care Centers in the Duhok Governorate to be connected to the Central Office of HAWAR Programme at the Department of Pediatrics in Duhok Teaching Hospital (DTH). The physicians concerned in these Primary Care Centers; Beroshke in the city of Duhok and Batofa, Qadish and

Sheladize in the rural areas, will open special registers on the mental and neuro-psychiatric cases among the children visiting each center. Especial systems for management and follow-up were to be applied for these cases. The instruments used here (Ahmad, 1992; Ahmad, 1993), were to be used by the same procedure in the Central Office as well. The interviews mainly concentrate on "Al-Anfal" 1988 and the Mass-Escape Tragedy (MET) 1991. The identified cases of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were to be treated with the "Re-wind" technique (Muss, 1991).

For further information regarding Hawar Programme, please see the separate Progress Report (Tayeeb & Ahmad, 1993).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CHILDREN OF KURDISTAN

1. A Two-Year Follow-Up after the Mass-Escape Tragedy:

The majority of children who were first interviewed directly after the Mass-Escape Tragedy (MET) in Iraqi Kurdistan on Spring 1991 regarding post-traumatic stress symptoms had been moved with their families inside Duhok and Erbil Governorates. Most of them were re-found with their families in their original villages that were undergoing reconstruction. The interviews revealed relapsing symptoms of PTSD as compared with the index-interviews, two-month follow-up and the one-year follow-up (Ahmad, Mohamad & Ameen, 1998). The only girl who was treated with "Re-wind" technique during 1992 was now doing well. She became the first in her class at school during the next year.

2. The Comparative Study on the Orphans:

Orphans in orphanages were compared with those in the foster care in Sulaymania and Duhok during 1992 (Ahmad & Mohammad, 1996). One year later, all the respondents except two children in the foster care were reinterviewed with Achenbach's Child Behavior Check List (CBCL) (Achenbach, 1991) aiming to compare the foster care system versus

orphanages in taking care of the orphans in the Kurdish society.

In addition to Achenbach's CBCL (Achenbach, 1991), all of the subjects were interviewed by the two instruments used in the other studies on PTSD among children of Kurdistan, in regard to the eventual occurrence of PTSD symptoms after "AL-Anfal" 1988 and the MET 1991. The results indicated outweigh of symptoms among the orphanage children, as compared with the foster care group (Ahmad & Mohammad, 1996).

THE ANFAL SURVIVORS

THE DECLARATION OF "AL-ANFAL"

As a continuation of its genocide campaign against the Kurdish People in Iraq, the Iraqi Regime decided in February 1988 on the "Al-Anfal" act against the "disobeying" Kurds in the North (Middle East Watch, 1994). "Al-Anfal" means in the ancient Arabic language "the things to win in war". The name is even mentioned in Koran in order to give the profit Mohammed and his people the right to keep all what they obtain during war. The law was to give the Iraqi Army free hands during the attack in Kurdistan. The army had clear orders to extirpate all living materials including human being, animals and plants. After "Al-Anfal" declaration the Iraqi Army intensified its chemical warfare in Kurdistan, reaching its peak when the city of Halabje was attacked by the air forces on 16 March 1988.

The military operation "Al-Anfal 1" was applied during March-April 1988 in Germyan and other regions in the Governorates of Kerkuk and Sulaymaniya. During several weeks, 728 villages were destroyed (Middle East Watch, 1994).

"Al Anfal II" started on 24 August 1988, to affect an area of 20,000 Kilometer of Behdinan in the Governorates of Mosul, Duhok and Erbil (Abu Kawa, 1990).

THE SEQUELAE OF EVENTS

During 1987 - 1990 a total number of 3900 villages were destroyed in the area exposed to the "Al-Anfal" operations (Kurdistan Regional Assembly, 1992). The army had clear orders not to leave any signs of life in the region. People were either to be killed or removed in military cars to special prisons. Farms and Forests were burned up, water springs were exploded and all the houses were made on a par with the ground. People who were met by the army during its march were killed directly, regardless the age and the sex. Even those men who spontaneously surrendered were taking the risk to be killed immediately. No one knows how many people were killed. The number 200,000-300.000 has been mentioned (Calbrith, 1991). However, the brutality in these operations can be illustrated by some witnesses:

- In the village of Kesta in Barwary Bala, 40 men were collected and executed by gunfire on 26 August 1988, in front of their relatives and other people in the village.

- Between 25-27 August 1988, about 1500 people were killed when they were trying to cross the river of Roshin in the northern part of the borders between Erbil and Duhok Governorates (Abu Kawa, 1990).

- On 26 August 1988, and only from the village of (Kurema), 42 men were executed nearby the village (Ahmad, 1989).

- In the village of Gyse, 12 men were executed by gunshots during few days (Ahmad, 1989).

- On 25 August 1988, several Plato planes threw their lasts of poison gas on 10 villages including Swar and Spindar in Berigarey. Some ten women and children were killed and many people were wounded (Ahmad, 198).

- On their escape way from the army, about 200 families were gathered in GelyeBaze in Barwary Bala, when 2 planes, early on the morning 29 August 1988, threw their lasts of poison gas on this collection of people in the valley. No one could survive the tragedy,

which was watched by the witness on the top of the mountain (Abu Kawa, 1990).

More than 100 000 people crossed the borders of Turkey and Iran in order to escape from the poison gas (Calbrith, 1991). The region of Akre-Shekhan was quickly surrounded by the army and the escape ways were cut off. Thus, some thousand horror-filled families were to surrendered to the army.

Especially after the amnesty declaration from the Iraqi Government, on 6 September 1988, the number of surrender families, who were returning back from the high mountains and the deep valleys, from the borders to Iran and Turkey and from the horrible conditions in the accommodation centers in Turkey and Iran, markedly increased.

THE DISAPPEARED PRISONERS

After being captured or surrendered, the families who survived the first confrontation with the army were transported by army cars to special castles inside some military camps nearby the cities of Duhok and Kerkuk. Then, all the males above the age of 10 years were separated from the families and transported to unknown place. Since then, they have been disappeared leaving no trace.

The majority of the interviews with the children and the women of "Al-Anfal" inside the camps of Sumood and Gejnikan points out the event of loosing the father or the husband by the way described above, as the most distressing event during all the tragedy.

Yaseen is 13 years old. He still has nightmares about the event when his father was taken away from the family for 5 years ago. He says that he often hears the voice of his father when he was crying out under the torture before he permanently disappeared.

Those families, who were suspected by the army to have members actively participated in the Kurdish freedom struggle, or having martyrs in that way, were all interrogated under torture. Then, regardless the

age and the sex, they were also separated from the other families and transported in military cars to meet the same fate of the men mentioned above.

Sabir is 11 years old. During the interview inside the camp of Sumood, while telling his experiences of the prison time in Topezawa for 5 years ago, he is repeatedly coming back to tell about the pregnant woman in the prison, whom he did not know before and who was exposed to severe torture every time she was interrogated about the fate of her husband. At last, when she mentioned that he had been killed during the Kurdish freedom struggle, the soldiers took her away with her two daughters, and since then he has not seen her any more. Nevertheless, he is unable to forget her.

By this way, more than 182,000 people have disappeared (Kurdistan Regional Assembly, 1992). Many families were still wishing that one day their disappeared relatives will return back. Some stories had been circulated about soldiers who had been escaped from the army in the desert in southwest of Iraq, and who were said to have witnessed mass-executions of those disappeared people, participated in making mass graves for them or heard gruesome stories about them being buried alive. Others described how some of these men had survived the mass-executions and were fortunate enough to escape from their mass-graves to be landed in Arab villages and then arrived in Kurdistan again. Some of the women and the girls were said to be sold in Kuwait, Saudi Arabian and Sudan. However, the truth in these stories is to be confirmed.

THE SURVIVORS

After they were separated from their men, the remaining families consisting of children, women and old people were removed to other prisons in Nuqret Selman south of Baghdad, Topezawa-Dibis southeast of Kirkuk, Selamiya south of Mosul, Tikreet and other places in the desert in south and middle of Iraq. All of these prisons were similar in

being inside a military camp, away from the normal life and consisting of large halls with small windows, each containing several hundred prisoners. They were only allowed to leave these halls for toilet visits or to bring water. That was happening under rigid supervision and rough treatment from the guards, who were usually beating the people, sexually abusing them and exposing them to physical and psychological torture.

Because of the rough treatment, the malnourishments and the bad sanitary and housing conditions inside the halls, several people were dying every day. The soldiers were taking care of the dead bodies, by burying them in groups in superficial holes outside the camp.

Mehmmod was 10 years old when he and his family were captured in the village of Werkhel in Rekany. During the interview in Gejnikan 5 years later, When I asked him "What was the most distressing to you during all the event" he answered "It was when I saw in the prison of Selamiya, the dogs tearing off the body of my grandfather outside the camp, where the soldiers had thrown him few hours after his death".

During the time in prison, the women and the girls were usually taken to individual interrogations, when they were exposed to different kinds of torture including rape. As a result of this, many social tragedies have been occurred later on. Women who became pregnant or had children after these rape incidents have been suffering from social isolation, persecution and direct life threats. Many such cases have been of big concern to the organization Human Rights in Kurdistan, which started after the establishment of the Liberated Kurdistan on spring 1991.

THE "CONCENTRATION CAMPS"

After the suffering time inside these special prisons, lasting from several weeks to several years, the survivors were gradually removed to mainly 3 concentration camps that were constructed for this purpose on 1987 (Al-Neqshebendy, 1990).

The major part of the families from Behdinan was placed in the desert of Gejnikan 22 kilometer west to Erbil. The final population number here during the study became 15,000 families, who were living in social destitution under strict police supervision. Without the pertinacious help from the surrounding people in Erbil and the villages around defying the embargo of the authorities, those people could not have survived.

The families who were originally coming from the destroyed villages in Kerkuk and Sulaymaniya Governorates were placed in Sumood camp 10 kilometers west to the city of Kalar, and the camp of Shoresh nearby the city of Chamchamal in Sulaymaniya Governorate. Sumood was containing 12 000 families as maximum.

The living conditions in all these concentration camps were similarly intolerable. Different kinds of torture and persecution were to continue. By time, many families were able to escape from the camps and to start new life elsewhere in Kurdistan.

During the uprising of spring 1991 in Iraqi Kurdistan, the inhabitants of these concentration camps were among the first people who attacked their guards, destroyed the military castles surrounding the camps and actively participated in the liberty struggle. The Mass-Escape Tragedy (MET) was, however, to follow soon and many people were forced to leave to Iran and Turkey. When they returned back, the majority was forced to settle down again in these camps, having no other alternative until the beginning of the reconstruction operations in Kurdistan, in summer 1992. Since then, many people have left the camp and returned back to their original villages, after they had been provided with building materials and other assistance from the reconstruction organizations and the local governmental authorities of Kurdistan.

THE STUDY CONDITIONS

In order to make a survey for the Qandil Project, regarding the general conditions for the survivors of "Al-Anfal", with special focus on the

effects of psychological trauma, and in coordination with the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in the Kurdistan Regional Government, I was visiting the camp of Sumood during 12-17 July and Gejnikan on 19-21 July 1993. Only 4512 families were remained in Sumood and 200 families in Gejnikan. The rest had returned back to the original villages, helped by the reconstruction campaign which was going on in the area in order to build up all the 4000 villages destroyed by the Iraqi Regime.

In this survey, we used several internationally well known instruments in the field of psychological trauma and PTSD among children and adults (Achenbach, 1991; Ahmad, 1992; Fredrick, Pynoos & Nader, 1991; Mollica, 1991; Penayo, 1990; WHO, 1983).

The results showing high PTSD frequencies particularly in children are to be presented in figure 1 – 9. Further details can be obtained from the separate report on Sumood and Gejnikan (Ahmad, 1993).

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENATIONS

The findings of this study have been presented and discussed in several international conferences (Ahmad, 1995). They have been published as reports in English (Ahmad, 1989), Arabic (Feyzelik, 1989) and Kurdish languages (Qochan, 2008), chapters of textbooks (Ahmad, 2000) and contents of doctoral thesis (Ahmad, 1999).

As the rates of physical and psychological consequences of trauma, including PTSD, are high component among the very high number of disabilities among the survivors of the "Al-Anfal", it is essential to build up a center for rehabilitation and care of the survivors of the "Al-Anfal" operations in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Such a center should also be capable of receiving other trauma survivors in Kurdistan, and to manage patients having their symptoms caused by other forms of organized violence that has been exerted on the Kurdish society. However, the survivors of "Al-Anfal", and other people who have their relatives

disappeared, and who still know nothing about the fate of them, are to be considered the most severely traumatized people who are continuously suffering and who need both professional help and political efforts to find out the truth and to obtain redress.

The survivors of psychological trauma due to the "Al-Anfal" in 1988, the chemical warfare during the 1970s and the 1980s, the MET in 1991 and other forms of organized violence, are widespread all over Kurdistan. Thus, a network of professionals working with survivors of organized violence in Iraqi Kurdistan is suggested to build up. It can be called, for example, by the same initials (SOVIK). The suggested rehabilitation center and the proposed network have to be connected to the Department of Child Mental Health at the University of Duhok that has been established since 2001 as an academic unit of collaboration between the Uppsala University in Sweden and the University of Dohuk in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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(*) Copies of the mentioned works can be obtained from the author.