

The Impact of War and Armed Conflicts on the Arab Family

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In 2004 Doha hosted the International Conference on the Family celebrating the 10th anniversary of the International Year of the Family. At that time the world, seeking to develop programmes for the preservation and protection of the family as “the natural and fundamental group unit of society” (Universal Declaration for Human Rights, Article 16 (3))

The International Year of the Family had been intended to intensify focus on the family, and to promote greater awareness of families’ contributions to economic development and social progress in societies everywhere. From then on, there was greater emphasis and more inclusion of the family as whole in governments’ economic and social welfare policies as well as in programs implemented by development organizations.

The Sustainable Development goals and its precursor, the Millennium Development Goals recognized the importance of addressing the development needs of individuals hand in hand with the family unit. Thus leading to a more comprehensive and integrated approach to development resulting in greater impact on social development as a whole.

To achieve that, international instruments, goals and indicators were developed, yielding programs and projects sponsored by the United Nations and implemented through international agencies, regional, national and community-based organizations.

The aim had been to help family unit in order to preserve it as one of the essential building blocks for social development, cohesion and unity, thereby safeguarding the health of societies as a whole.

Today, Ladies, Gentlemen, Colleagues,

in the Arab region, we are facing the destruction on the social and cultural infra-structure that preserved the family, leading to the disintegration of the family as the unit in which cultural and identity are preserved and passed on as well as the promise of a more productive future.

Today we are facing wars and armed conflicts that have devastated not only individual lives but entire ways of life, wiping out families along with the communities they built.

Today, instead of enhancing and supporting the health and wellbeing of families,

we are gathered here to explore ways of protecting families from the devastation of a war machine that has left them destitute, fearful, hungry, seeking refuge in places often hostile to them—suffering the loss of home and community as well as loved ones.

In the face of this reality and knowing that we are powerless to effect any political change that could lead to peace—we are left with trying to protect and preserve the integrity of the family, and maintain and uphold not only their basic rights but their humanity.

In the past few years, I have had the sad privilege of visiting and speaking to families that have been uprooted from their home countries, their communities, their way of life. Many are suffering from post traumatic disorders—effecting their physical health and their ability to adapt to their new situations. Most expressed anxiety relating to the uncertainty of their lives, and many spoke of their fear of the future and their fear that they may not have a future.

But what is most touching and clearly apparent is that they all spoke of themselves as part of a unit. Each person's worries and fears were expressed on behalf of their entire family. More often than not, it included the extended family.

Friends and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

In spite of our best efforts in providing aid, relief, medical care, basic shelter and basic needs, in addition to a number of development programs and projects...we have not been able to rebuild this fundamental unit of society that has been broken because the social structure around it that sustained it has disintegrated.

How has the family been affected by war and armed conflict?

For the purpose of this meeting, I will speak to you of Syrian families in refuge based on meeting them and interacting with them in several refugee camps.

There is no doubt that the result of this war and the conditions of refuge have resulted in the disintegration of the family structure.

It is safe to say that the primary victims of this breakdown are the children.

Children are dependent on the care, attention and love of their families, who provide them with a sense of security and knowledge of the world. These attachments, necessary to their physical and emotional health, become disrupted in times of war and armed conflicts due to a number of factors:

- The emotional unavailability of parents due to their distraction in providing protection and subsistence or preoccupation with sheer survival
- Or the loss of one parent or both due to death, depression, hopelessness—depending on the situation
- Or the loss of the emotional security usually provided by members of the extended family

In refugee situations where only the nuclear family has managed to escape, often I encountered children, as well as their parents pining for grandparents, uncles, aunts and

cousins; and sometimes even neighbours and other members of their community. Most dream of returning to the country which symbolizes the family.

These situation do not constitute a disruption in the life of the family as such, but is a disruption in cultural and traditional way of life that has long defined what constitutes family and familial relations and has defined the world for them.

Jihad is a young Yemini child who has been dreaming, since his arrival at the refugee camp in Djibouti, of his friend and neighbour Basma who fled with her family to a different place. Jihad expressed the innocence of childhood when he insisted that he will look for Basma and find her even after 20 years.

Another major disruption of family life relates to roles and responsibilities.

The traditional distribution of roles within the family in our culture dictate that the father is the bread winner and financial supporter of his family—including, sometimes, the extended family.

In the situation of refuge, especially among working class families, forced unemployment and the inability to provide for the family, have sidelined the role of “head of the family” resulting in severe depression. In many cases women and older male offspring have had to take on that role.

I cannot tell you how many times I have heard wives and children say: my husband/my father is ill and he can't work anymore—and the symptoms are usually severe headaches or general weakness and fatigue.

These are certainly genuine symptoms and not excuses. But they are definitely the results of depression, helplessness and an inability to adapt to circumstances in which they are no longer in control.

Ironically, wives and mothers in this situation, who had never experienced any form of violence or indignity at the hands of their husbands, have become victims of domestic violence, as well as their children at times. This has been the direct result of the powerlessness and helplessness that those men feel and their inability to adapt to the difficult and changing circumstances.

In so many cases, I have seen children as young as 10 or 12 years, taking on responsibilities of caring for their siblings. These children have been forced to leave their childhood behind and take on adult roles.

I was both touched and impressed by the level of understanding these children expressed when explaining the difficulties their parents are facing in keeping the family together.

But this premature maturity, so to speak, is another disruption in the life trajectory of these children, that is, in the normal projection of the life of a child. All aspects of childhood are obliterated: the natural dependency on adults for care and protection; the need to look up to adult role models; a carefree childhood of play, exploration, learning and education. In other words, normal and timely development of the child is disrupted.

I know that these concepts are not new to any of us working in the field.

But in a meeting with Nour el Dine who is in his early twenties in Al Zaatari camp in Jordan, he was able exemplify these concepts through his instinctive affection for his family.

He fled Syria with his widowed sister and her five children, his brother's widow and her six children, his mother and his own wife and baby son. This young man is the only supporter of a family of 16, 12 of whom are children. He works when he finds work and he receives aid in the form of coupons and monthly rations. "But", he said when interviewed for the documentary *Refugees in their Homeland*¹, "this is not enough for children who have to live their childhood. Yes, we [the adults] lost our country and we are refugees, but children feel at home as long as they are among family. So these children need to live their childhood and feel secure."

Nour el Dine is struggling to give his nieces, nephews and son a childhood and provide them with the loving security of a family when all other structures have broken down.

Sadly not all refugee families are lucky enough to have a Nour el Dine who is capable to understand what is important to preserve the unity and integrity of the family.

As I mentioned above, whether due to illness, psychosocial disability or death, sometimes the eldest male offspring takes on the role of head of the family. Often he is a teenager, who is inexperienced and unprepared for the responsibility, not to mention dealing with his own trauma. The only way these young men are able to cope is by becoming authoritarian and sometimes resorting to violence to establish control and dominance.

Predominantly their female siblings have become victims of this violence. In refugee settlements and camps in Lebanon there have been numerous reported cases of what is referred to as "honour killings". When all social structures fail, the family resorts to extreme measures in an effort to preserve the only remaining structure.

At the same time, when the eldest male child takes on the responsibility for the family, he is often subjected to dangers. The day we arrived on a visit to a refugee camp in Lebanon, we found out that a male child had been hit by a car while transporting a gas cylinder to his family and was taken to hospital.

By the same token there have been many reported cases of underage marriages. Some of the agencies and organizations working in the camps have referred to these as daughters or sisters "sold into marriage".

From my observation I have concluded that rightly or wrongly, families believe that the marriage of a daughter will not only relieve a financial burden but also provide her with financial support.

¹ *Refugees in their Homeland*, a documentary about the visits to refugee camps by the Special Envoy of the LAS Secretary General for Emergency Relief & Humanitarian Affairs, Sheikha Hissa Al Thani; Directed by Aly Alaraby.

However, many of these marriages have ended in tragedy due to immaturity, lack of appropriate reproductive health care, and/or the absence of support of the extended family that characterized their lives under normal circumstances

Last but not least, I would like to point out an aspect that represents a loss to us as a region:

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, thousands fled to neighbouring countries wanting to remain close to their homeland among people who shared their culture and language. Increasingly, the refugees I have been meeting lately are trying to find ways to immigrate to Western countries. Canada, the UK and Sweden are among the countries most often mentioned. Sadly, this is not only because they have lost hope of a peaceful resolutions. But also because they have been experiencing hostility in neighbouring host countries who themselves have been socially, politically and economically burdened by the large numbers of refugees.

Immigrating to the West, especially as a result of such traumatic events, will result in a number of things:

- The breakup of the extended family which has formed the backbone of social and cultural life
- The loss of connection with their national, cultural and religious identity
- The loss of future generations of potentially productive and contributing members of our societies

We have a responsibility in this region to be better hosts to these traumatized and destitute families. And if we cannot host them, then we need to provide the necessary support to help them live with dignity within the sanctity of their family. We need to help preserve the unity of that family by providing hope and assistance to adult caretakers in order to ensure that the children enjoy as healthy a childhood as possible under the current circumstances.

It is what I hope for and what I work to achieve.

Thank you and I look forward to a discussion that will provide some relief to hundreds of thousands of families.