

The Legacy of War: A Glimpse into the Life of an Iraqi Woman

by Marie Braun, with Shaymaa's story as told to the writer

Life in Iraq has been extremely difficult for women for many years, and the unavailability of security, electricity, clean drinking water, health care, and education has made life more complicated.



Shaymaa Abdulkadham Hasan Hasan in the doorway of her home. The safety of her family is a never-ending source of concern.

Photo: Sami Rasouli.

Shaymaa Abdulkadham Hasan Hasan was born in Baghdad, Iraq, on 7 July 1982. She was only eight years old when the U.S. declared war on Iraq in January 1991. More bombs were dropped on her country in the 43 days of the First Gulf War than were dropped in all of World War II – the equivalent of 7 1/2 Hiroshimas. Iraq went from a highly developed, technologically sophisticated and self-reliant country to a country whose people had to cope with totally new circumstances of life: no electricity, no clean or running water, food and fuel shortages, and transportation problems. People had to go to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers for their water, their refrigerators and stoves stopped working, their toilets would not flush, sewage piled up in the streets, and before long their children, the most vulnerable among them, began to die.

For most Americans, the First Gulf War ended in March 1991, but for Shaymaa's people the war had only begun. The new war of sanctions, which did not allow Iraq to import sufficient medicine and food, or materials necessary to repair the infrastructure, continued for 20 long years. It was a low-intensity war; it resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children and caused emotional and physical disabilities in two generations of Iraqi children. John and Karl Mueller reported in the May 1999 issue of Foreign Affairs that "the sanctions against Iraq have caused more deaths than all the weapons of mass destruction in the history of the world."

Then, on 20 March 2003, came "Shock and Awe," a second war, followed by eight years of occupation. And now Shaymaa lives under a puppet government in a country still devoid of basic necessities.

On 18 September 2010, Shaymaa traveled to the United States with her eight-year-old son, Mustafa Al Tameemi, so that Mustafa could receive medical treatment. The following is some of the information that she shared with Marie Braun about Mustafa, her family, and what life is like for an Iraqi woman:

Shaymaa's Story

I would like to tell you about Mustafa's accident. We live in a house that was built near a high voltage electric cable. We did not realize how dangerous this cable was until we witnessed what happened to Mustafa. He was up on the walled roof, where we sleep on hot evenings. Due to the humidity and the rain, the cable exploded and a bolt touched Mustafa. That tremendous electrical power traveled from his shoulder down his left arm and to both of his legs. We rushed him to the hospital. But the medical care was bad. There has been no progress or advancement in the neurosurgery or burn departments and also the artificial limbs unit. There is also corruption in the medical arena. Since most of the professional class was displaced, we don't have many qualified, well-trained nurses or doctors in Iraq. In the burn department, the officials did not take good care of my son and others. Patients were dying one after another despite simple injuries. They were dying from contamination and infection. Sometimes a patient was left four or five days with no medical treatment. This is a result of lack of oversight and lack of good management in a lawless state due to the war and occupation.



Who pays the price for war? Eight- year old Mustafa Al Tameemi lost part of a leg and the use of his arm due to unsafe conditions and lack of proper medical treatment in Iraq. But his is an unusual case. He was eventually able to receive help in the U.S.

Photo: Sami Rasouli.

Mustafa had been moving his feet for a long time after the accident and had no problem, but due to the neglect of doctors and because he was not treated properly, his right leg had to be amputated below the knee. He also lost the use of his left arm.

When Mustafa became disabled, there was no financial aid to help our family survive this crisis. We lived with no hope. When we brought Mustafa home from the hospital, we had to hire a nurse for follow-up care. The nurse who was treating Mustafa was cruel. Sometimes when Mustafa cried because he was in pain, the nurse hit him. Therefore, we stopped bringing nurses to the home to treat Mustafa. I was his nurse for a long time, changing his dressings until his wounds were healed.

We submitted several complaints to the local government relative to the dangerous high voltage cable that injured Mustafa. When they did the investigation, the expert advised us to leave the house because it was dangerous for us to live there, but we

had no money to move. We waited a year for the government to help us move or get the cable away from our house, but due to the corruption and changes in local government, nothing was done to help us. My husband and our other five children are still living in that house. We pray to God to help us with this dead-end situation.

Things are difficult for all my children. My husband and I felt that we had to withdraw our daughter, Ayatt, who is 13 and a fifth grader, from school because she was not learning much and we were afraid that something might happen to her on the way to or from school. Many families don't send their daughters to school because of the fear that they might be kidnapped, raped, or killed. There is also a lack of books and qualified teachers, and some of the teachers use physical punishment, which complicates the situation. Ayatt was afraid of the teachers. Due to this cruel circumstance, she is staying home without education.

In Iraq, there are no schools for disabled people and there are many disabled people due to the latest war and the period of sanctions from 1991. I am very happy to see my son Mustafa going to school here while he is in medical treatment. He told me that he is so happy to be in school with the kids and that he wishes there was a school in Iraq where he could go to school with other disabled children.

Also, I would like you to know how much my husband is suffering, just like other Iraqis when they go out to make a living. The economy is really bad, with 60 percent unemployment. My husband is a taxi driver, but he only makes about \$10 a day, which is not enough to support our family. We never know if he will come home safely because there are lots of explosions; this is very frightening for us. Since I have been here, my 20-year-old nephew disappeared while driving a taxi between Najaf and Baghdad. His family has searched for him, but they have not been able to find him and they believe he has been killed. I am afraid for my husband, as it is common practice for criminals to steal a taxi and kill the driver. The payment for such a heinous deed is \$100.

Life in Iraq has been extremely difficult for women for many years, and the unavailability of security, electricity, clean drinking water, health care, and education has made life more complicated. I spend most of my time cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and caring for my six children. I wash clothes for eight people by hand because of the lack of electricity. My mother lives with us. She and my 13-year-old daughter help with cleaning and caring for the children. I do not have time to go out of the home to socialize.

Besides the physical assault, women have been targeted in Iraq when they pass through checkpoints to go from one place to another. Also, during the U.S. military raids and search for insurgents, the U.S. army arrested Iraqi women. They are the wives, mothers, daughters, or sisters of Iraqi men who were suspected of resisting the occupation. The purpose of their arrests was to pressure them to surrender men who resist the occupation. Women have also been kidnapped and detained for long periods of time in American prisons in Iraq. Many of these women are physically

abused, tortured, and sometimes raped. Because of the Iraqi culture, this results in extreme shame for the women and a burden to the honor of their families. Some women have been killed in order to defend the honor of the family.

Many peaceful people in Iraq have died or have been severely injured because of the random campaign of bombing. Other Iraqi families have lost their lives when they approached checkpoints that were set up by the U.S. and the British. The occupation forces would decide that Iraqis could not travel in certain areas in their own country. Iraqis, unaware of such restrictions, would suddenly find themselves in prohibited places and would be killed. This made travel very difficult in Iraq.

The doctor has told us that Mustafa should be checked every six months after he receives his prosthesis. We will go back to Iraq soon and it is very difficult to bring him back again after only six months. I hope that the work that has been done to help him will not go in vain, which I fear if we are not able to come back regularly. So I am asking for more help from the members of St. Joan of Arc to come back at least once a year or every other year so that Mustafa can be treated properly, so that he can grow normally like other children, so that we accomplish the goal of bringing him here, and so he continues to be as happy as he is now.

[This concludes Shaymaa's commentary]

Mustafa now has a new prosthesis provided by Shriners Hospital and has had an operation at St. Mary's Hospital, Mayo Clinic in Rochester, on his left arm, both of which will significantly improve his quality of life. Mustafa and Shaymaa returned to Iraq in early February. We were very sad to see them go and we wonder what life will be like for them. We know they have been forever changed, and so have we. But we should see Mustafa again when he returns to Minnesota a year from now for a new prosthesis and more repair to his left elbow.

The treatment for Mustafa, which cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, has been graciously provided free of charge by Shriners Hospital, Gillette Hospital, St. Paul Radiology, Mayo Clinic, and others. We owe them a deep debt of gratitude.

Sami Rasouli, an Iraqi-American, who has lived in Najaf for the past five years, brought Shaymaa and Mustafa to the United States with the mutual assistance of the Muslim Peacemakers Teams in Iraq and St Joan of Arc Church in Minneapolis. Sami tells us that there is less killing and fewer checkpoints since U.S. forces moved out of the cities, but there is still little repair of the infrastructure and the large criminal element that came with the war remains active, making it dangerous to travel any distance from one's home. Sami also reports that the sandstorms have decreased significantly since the military moved one million pieces of equipment out of Iraq. The great increase in sandstorms during the occupation was due to the movement of heavy military equipment, which broke the crust of the desert floor, leaving loose sand to be picked up by the wind and blown for miles. There was sand everywhere,

making it difficult for the people to keep their home a clean and safe environment for their children.

The situation of Shaymaa and her family is only one example of the hardships endured by families living in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of other children in Iraq lack proper medical care, clean water, adequate food, educational facilities, and a healthy environment. Most of the educated middle class have been killed or have fled the country, and a majority of the remaining children and adults suffer from post traumatic stress. It will take decades for Iraq and its people to recover from the devastation of the illegal and immoral U.S.-led war and occupation.



Jerry-rigged electrical wires are a source of danger for the residents of Iraqi cities today. Outside corporations were awarded lucrative contracts but in a chaotic and corrupt environment, ravaged by war and occupation, Iraq's infrastructure was never properly rebuilt.

Photo: Sami Rasouli.

Marie Braun continues to work with the Twin Cities Peace Campaign, which she co-founded after traveling to Iraq during the sanctions period. She was a relentless advocate for lifting the sanctions. Also an activist with Women Against Military Madness, Alliant Action, and Iraq Peace Action Coalition, Marie has continued to act as one of the main organizers of protests against U.S. wars and occupations.