



Five Years Old in Iraq

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children

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A child's fifth birthday is a special occasion. As every mother knows, the first five years are the most vulnerable and important of a child's life. They are the foundation for a healthy future and fulfilled potential.

Young bodies and minds develop dramatically during this time, relying on proper nutrition and good feeding practices at home. By five, child should be fully protected against the main vaccine-preventable diseases. Other common illnesses like diarrhoea and pneumonia also become less life-threatening. Most child deaths from preventable causes occur during these fragile early years.

At five years old, a child is about to enter a new world of exciting challenges – of school, of participation in community life and plans for the future. Preparing a toddler mentally and physically for this second phase of their childhood is a challenge for every parent.

But in Iraq these challenges can be overwhelming. Too many families struggle to access the basic support they need: quality health care, nourishing food, kindergartens and security in their communities. They fear that their children's future may be slipping away.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the world's most ratified document, guarantees children's fundamental rights even in times of conflict. It grants special consideration and protection to children affected by conflict, to protect them from harm and safeguard their growth and development.

These conditions are not being met for children in many parts of Iraq. And yet, in some areas – and against the odds – Iraqi children are thriving.

This report features mothers from south, central and northern Iraq whose children will celebrate their fifth birthday this year. Their stories offer a glimpse into the many faces of childhood in Iraq today.

The living situations and experiences may be different, but each story is linked by a common thread. Parents deeply cherish their children and wish only to provide the better future all children deserve. UNICEF, through its ongoing work in Iraq, is committed to doing whatever we can to help Iraq's mothers and fathers achieve this goal.





UNICEF in Action – Iraq

UNICEF has been on the ground inside Iraq since 1984, providing children and women with vital humanitarian relief and bringing them the essentials of a better life. Today, programmes supported by UNICEF are reaching millions of Iraqi children with a package of critical care - improving basic health services, promoting quality education, rebuilding water and sanitation systems, protecting children from abuse and exploitation, and advocating for their best interests.



UNICEF's humanitarian action network, IMPACT: Iraq, is also delivering rapid emergency responses to children and families in crisis, relieving immediate suffering and promoting early recovery.

Searching for healthcare

Meriam , 28 years, and her five years old daughter Fatima in Basra of southern Iraq



Fatima was only two months old when war broke out. My eldest son Mohammed was then five and Abdullah was two. Both were delivered and raised smoothly.

In Fatima's earliest months I was afraid that she would fall sick, because the electricity had been cut and it was impossible to find a doctor after dark. I put her clothes and milk in a special hiding place in case of an emergency.

We heard rumors about mothers losing their children to diseases or to bombs. There was shooting in the streets. My children's safety at that time was my biggest concern.

As soon as hostilities eased slightly, children started to go to school and people went back to work. I decided to take Fatima to the health centre as her vaccination dose was overdue. Doctors and nurses were happy to see us, and would smile when we came in. It was reassuring for us! We all

thought that suffering was finished and that prosperous times were coming. It was good to see Fatima was healthy. She got all her doses of vaccines that year.

But in the next years of her childhood, we felt this hope begin to slip away. There was a windstorm of violence, lawlessness and unemployment in my area. My husband's salary in the past was sufficient enough to meet our needs and still leave a little for ourselves. But now we have to spend most of the family income on electricity, water and fuel. We have to buy water because the supply near our home is not good. There is very little for food and other household requirements.

The quality of healthcare at public hospitals has diminished seriously. So when Fatima gets sick now, I have to take her to private doctors and pay for the examination, tests and medicine. When she was a baby, I could get these services for free. I am also afraid to travel out to the health centre because there are threats to women on the streets. I can never travel after dark. Thank god I am not pregnant now, because then my unborn baby would really suffer from lack of proper exams and ante-natal care.

"Children in Iraq pay the price for conflict when insecurity cuts them off from access to the most basic health services. Therefore, we are committed to ensure that the most vulnerable children, not only those we have easy access to, do not miss out".

**Alexander Malyavin
Chief, Survival, Growth and Development**

I am determined not to give up for my little daughter and my other children. So I decided to go back to school and qualify to become a teacher. My husband was extremely supportive. He helped me sit for the external baccalaureate exam and join the teachers' institute. I am going to teach mathematics, as soon as I can find a job. When Fatima is old enough, she is going to go to school and become educated, so that she has the chance of a better life than this.

"The quality of healthcare at public hospitals has diminished seriously. So when Fatima gets sick now, I have to take her to private doctors and pay for the examination, tests and medicine".

Meriam, Fatima's mother

I cannot remember a time when we witnessed a true calmness . We Iraqis have been through wars, sanctions and this last conflict that dragged on for five years now. There is hardly any family not affected with loss and bereavement.

I am concerned about Fatima's attitude towards life and the effect of growing up in such a violent environment. In Eid (feast) holidays, her brothers want to buy toy machineguns and laser guns. They play games simulating war and killing.

When we were at their age, we had completely different toys such as construction toys, puzzles, jump ropes and balls that involve physical activity or imagination and creativity. I know that when Fatima starts school soon, she will hear about violence from her friends and I hope the teachers can give her the right support and guidance.

Children as young as Fatima are at the very start of their life. They need to be given our best attention so these current conditions do not harm their development. I think this can only be done of the family and school work together. We need help. Every day I look at my daughter and wish for her and all our children to live their childhood in peace and grow up to become good assets for our country.

Support for Survival and Growth

Across Iraq, UNICEF's health and nutrition programmes help children as young as Fatima get a better start to life. Working with WHO, UNICEF supports Iraq's health system to deliver lifesaving basic care to children from before birth through adolescence, and promote the health and survival of mothers.

With UNICEF and WHO support, 90% of Iraq's 4.8 million children under five have been continually immunized against polio during the National Immunization Days, while reported cases of measles, mumps and rubella among under five years old children have dropped remarkably.

UNICEF initiative to improve the health and nutritional status of children and women through the fortification of wheat flour with iron and folic acid is helping to combat anaemia, a leading cause of pregnancy-related complications and maternal deaths.

UNICEF has been rehabilitating and constructing Primary Health Care centres, Maternal and Child Health units throughout the country. UNICEF also provides emergency supplies and basic equipment to these facilities in remote and under-served areas as well as Oral Rehydration Salts and other basic essential drugs .

Trying to nurture a young mind

Amal, 32 years, lives in Baghdad with her five years old son, Baqir



Baqir was born in mid May 2003. At that time, the country was still chaos. I was depressed after my delivery and found it hard to breastfeed Baqir as I did with his eldest siblings. The doctor said that stress was to blame.

But a mother has to be strong for her children. I got back on my feet and gave Baqir extra attention to make up for those early days. I learned from the health centre to keep children as healthy as much as possible by keeping him warm, feeding him properly and completing his vaccination doses.

It's more important now to keep children healthy because the costs are too high if they fall sick. Public hospitals are longer providing good services, specialised doctors have fled the country and medicines are not subsidized any more. Private clinics charge high prices.

I thank God for two blessings; my children are so far safe and healthy and they are also clever at school. Despite all odds, the school of my children is run by a very dedicated headmistress, she follows up on every single child's attendance and investigates on the reason if a child fails to show up one day. All parents in the neighbourhood are grateful for this lady and they owe her all respect. We are fortunate to have our children go to a school where they learn the difference between good and bad thinking and behaviours in addition to their school subjects.

Unlike schools in other parts of the city, my children attend sports and arts classes which they enjoy and benefit from. Though the attendance is frequently interrupted by security incidents, curfews and prolonged holidays, the teachers volunteer to give extra time to make for the lost classes.

But my little one, Baqir, doesn't go to kindergarten. I know how important this could be for his development but the nearest kindergarten is far away

"The key elements of a secure, happy childhood - school, healthcare, playing with friends and a stable family environment - are being pushed farther out of reach by war, ongoing violence and displacement".

Nasreen Taha
UNICEF Education Facilitator

from our home and to reach there we need to cross a checkpoint. I am afraid my children could be attacked or kidnapped on the journey there. Baqir's siblings learned the ABC, numeration, songs and many useful things at kindergarten – but this has become a luxury these days. We are waiting for an opportunity to give him some kind of stimulation for his mind, otherwise how will he be ready for school?

It's hard to see how our living conditions will improve without help. Uninterrupted electricity has become a thing of the past. Water supplies are also a problem here. Streets are littered with piles of garbage and pools of sewage. The walls built to stop violence in communities have also stopped me taking Baqir to the health centre when he needs to go.

My children are my strength and joy. Raghda and Noora want to become teachers just like their headmistress. Young Baqir is just old enough to play marbles and wants to become Iraq's marbles champion. He has a small bicycle but he cannot ride it outside our small garden. Baqir knows that this is one rule that a little boy cannot break!

"But my little one, Baqir, doesn't go to kindergarten. I know how important this could be for his development but the nearest kindergarten is far away from our home and to reach there we need to cross a checkpoint".

Amal, Baqir's mother

Support for Early Childhood Development

Iraq's young children, like Baqir, need better support and care to help them cope with the stress of their environment. They also need stimulation for their developing minds, to encourage their intellectual growth and prepare them for the best start at school.

Through UNICEF's Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme, children in over 2,400 kindergartens and primary schools nationwide are receiving early learning and stimulation. The ECD programme provides education and recreational materials for young children and trains caregivers and teachers on the healing effects of play and art on young children.

UNICEF's Integrated Community Initiative for Children (ICIC) is also working with communities, teachers and local authorities to improve school facilities in six of Iraq's most deprived governorates – so children like Raghda and Noora can learn in a safe, friendly environment. Through the ICIC, schools are receiving new and up-graded toilets, classrooms and playgrounds, better school furniture and essential learning and teaching materials. Many of the schools participating in this initiative are also hosting large numbers of additional pupils displaced by violence from other parts of the country.

Need for psychosocial support

Rafiaa , 42 years, and her five years old, Raheeq, live in Mosul in northern Iraq



I have been volunteering to work in the Polio National Days for eight consecutive years. We have become experienced vaccinators, but the campaigns that preceded the war were more relaxed and safe.

I fell pregnant with Raheeq in early 2003. I was frightened, thinking all the time that I might be in situation when I need doctor's assistance and I could not get it. Thankfully I did not go into labour until the quiet time after the conflict. When I felt the pains start, my husband took me to the nearby hospital where I gave birth to my beautiful daughter and was discharged safely.

Raising Raheeq and now also my littlest one, Ahmed today is not easy compared to my eldest kids. When she gets sick in the night I cannot take her to hospital. Medicine is now expensive, where it used to cost nothing. In the last few years it has been harder to get young children their vaccinations on time –

even though I am a health worker. Raheeq has just finished her routine schedule, which is already very late.

But what worries me most is that Raheeq is growing up seeing so much violence and signs of conflict. Until recently, Mosul was less violent compared to other governorates in the centre and south. But last summer, there were many bombings here, making us think that we would soon be just like Baghdad.

Raheeq is still very young to understand what is going on in her world. The sight of military vehicles in the street frightens her and she knows words that no child should say – like car bomb and suicide bomber. She worries about her sisters while they are at school during the day. She keeps on asking "When will Noor and Farah return from school? Will they be kidnapped?" When I was a child I heard of these things only in action movies.

Consultants specialised in children's behaviour are very rare in the country, therefore I try to undertake this task myself. Raheeq likes to draw so I give her drawing assignments to help her express her mind and get rid of

"The decline in access to and quality of learning, and the appalling psychosocial impact of conflict, appear to have the most alarming implications for Iraq's future".

***Fatuma Ibrahim
Chief , Child Protection and
Participation***

fearful thoughts. She has a nice voice that she likes to sing children's songs and we sing together. sing children's songs and we sing together.

I think about Raheeq's future and wonder if I will be able to send her to our local school. The police station is close to the school and I worry that if the station is attacked she might be hurt. Each time I hear and explosion, I rush to the school to make sure that my older children are safe. But then I think that the children's school is their one chance to learn and have fun, see their friends – so how can I keep them out?

I believe my children have been raised by caring and educated parents – but even so, they have suffered from this violence. My heart breaks for those poor children like Raheeq who do not have parents – the orphans and displaced ones at camps around the country. We need a break of peace and safety to help us nurture our children's present life and their future.

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Rafiah, Raheeq's mother

Psychosocial Support

UNICEF continues to strengthen Iraq's capacity to provide care and protection for the vulnerable children affected by conflict. UNICEF supported the development of a strategy and resources for psychosocial support and care in schools and communities. This programme focuses on home, school and community-based interventions for both children and their caregivers, including teachers and social workers. It is a core part of UNICEF's humanitarian response for children in crisis.

Seizing the chance for a brighter future

Zainab, 36 years, lives in Dohuk in northern Iraq with her five years old son Omed



I was in my 7th month of my pregnancy when war broke out. We fled to the village in the rural areas of Dohuk because it was safer to stay away from the city centre. My husband, an officer with the Peshmerga, couldn't join us since he was on duty alert in Erbil. The weather was extremely cold and damp. We didn't have clean water and I felt sick.

The doctor at the hospital told me that I was affected with mumps and put me on a strong course of antibiotics and medications that caused me to be wasted. Telephones were operational and I lost track of my children and husband for one week. But finally, once the conflict stopped, we were united again.

In June I gave birth to Omed, the nurse told me the baby was very weak because of my illness and lack of nutrition during pregnancy. We helped him start to breastfeed and he began to flourish.

Things have been getting slowly better since then. My husband is away for work a lot, so I am both father and mother to Omed, as well as my own work as a deputy headmistress at our local school. In a way, I am the mother of 300 children!

We are lucky that services for children are improving in this whole region. In particular we find that the immunization process is perfect in Dohuk. The campaigns always take place on time and vaccinators travel to the farthest spots in our governorate. If a child is missed, vaccines are available at health centres at any time. Omed has finished his schedule and everything is recorded in his health card.

Water supplies are also improving so I don't have to worry any more about the children getting diarrhea. But electricity is still very bad, we rely on generators completely.

Families here are very keen to educate their children, even little ones like Omed. You can hardly find a child out of school these days. In my area, there are more girls in school than boys now. This is a very positive sign. But unfortunately

"Iraq's schools are in urgent need of support, both in terms of access to schooling and the quality of learning children receive. Well-educated children represent our best chance to lift Iraq into a future of security and hope".

***Mette Nordstrand
Chief, Quality Learning and Development***

school infrastructure still needs a lot of repair. Some schools are in good shape but the rest are very bad. In winter, rain leaks in and children get wet in their classrooms. Toilets are a particular problem. I want Omed to be able to go and study at a decent school building where he feels warm and comfortable.

In general, I think the future is brighter for Omed than it was for my other children. Kurdistan, and Dohuk in particular, has been completely safe. The city is rebuilding. Salaries are going up. We do still have a long way to go to fix all our electricity, find clean water and dispose of sewage. But as long as things stay good here, I think we can make progress.

I am sad that I cannot travel to other cities of Iraq as we used to do in the past. I could go to visit my friends in Mosul or see a doctor in Baghdad before the war, but now this is too dangerous. People are also concerned that violence would come closer to us if things get worse in Mosul, which is next door to Dohuk. Omed is only young but I pray that he will inherit the stability and peace of mind we have long dreamed of. I look in his eyes and see our potential for a good future.

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Zainab, Omed's mother

Quality Learning and Development

UNICEF works with partners across Iraq to provide children with the essentials of a quality education, from school books and pens to child-friendly classrooms and well-trained teachers. UNICEF has helped to rehabilitate over 1,200 schools in Iraq since 2003, including installation of safe drinking water and separate toilets for girls who might otherwise be unable to attend.

UNICEF trains teachers and Ministry of Education officials to promote education and stimulation in pre-school children. This work also promotes child-friendly teaching methods and psychological care to make schools safe havens for children who have experienced trauma. To support the most vulnerable children, UNICEF is working with Iraq's government to provide a non-formal education system which has so far reached nearly 50,000 children prevented from attending school because of insecurity or poverty.

