

In Iraq, virus revives traumas of Daesh survivors

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-04 01:47

BAJET KANDALA CAMP, Iraq: For half a decade, Zedan suffered recurring nightmares about militants overrunning his hometown in northern Iraq. The 21-year-old Yazidi was just starting to recover when COVID-19 revived his trauma.

Zedan had lost several relatives when Daesh stormed into Sinjar, the rugged heartland of the Yazidi religious minority in Iraq's northwest.

The militants killed Yazidi men, took the boys as child soldiers and forced the women into sexual slavery.

Zedan and the surviving members of his family fled, finding refuge in the Bajet Kandala camp near the Syrian border where they still live today.

"We used to be farmers living a good life. Then IS (Daesh) came," he said, wringing his hands.

In a pre-fabricated building hosting the camp's mental health clinic, Zedan shared his traumas with Bayda Othman, a psychologist for international NGO Premiere Urgence. Zedan refers to the violence of 2014 vaguely as "the events."

The UN says they may constitute something much more serious: Genocide.

"I started having nightmares every night. I would see men in black coming to kill us," Zedan said, telling Othman that he had attempted suicide several times. He has been seeing her for years, learning how to cope with his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) through breathing exercises that she taught him.

Earlier this year, his nightly panic attacks stopped. Finally, he could sleep again. But only for a few months.

In March, Iraq declared a nationwide lockdown to try to contain the spread of Covid-19. Zedan broke down.

"I fear that my family could catch the virus or give it to me," he said. "It obsesses me."

As lockdown dragged on, Zedan's brother lost his job at a stationery shop on the edge of the camp.

"There's no more money coming into the family now. Just thinking about it gives me a panic attack," he said.

"The nightmares returned, and so did my desire to die."

Out of Iraq's 40 million citizens, one in four is mentally vulnerable, the World Health Organization says.

But the country is in dire shortage of mental health specialists, with only three per 1 million people.

HIGHLIGHT

The Daesh extremists killed Yazidi men, took the boys as child soldiers and forced the women into sexual slavery.

Speaking about trauma or psychological problems is widely considered taboo, and patients who spoke to AFP agreed to do so on the condition that only their first names would be used.

In camps across Iraq, which still host some 200,000 people displaced by violence, the pandemic has pushed many people with psychological problems into remission, Othman said.

"We noticed a resurgence of PTSD cases, suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts," she told AFP.

In October, there were three attempted suicides in Bajet Kandala alone by displaced people, who said their movements outside the camp were restricted by the lockdown, or whose economic situation had deteriorated even further. A tissue factory who fired people en masse, a potato farm that shut down, a haberdashery in growing debt: Unemployment is a common thread among Othman's patients.

"It leads to financial problems, but also a loss of self-confidence, which rekindles trauma," she said.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), about a quarter of Iraqis who were employed prior to lockdown have been permanently laid off. Youth were particularly hard hit: 36 percent of 18-24 years old who had been employed were dismissed, the ILO said.

A new patient in her forties walked toward the clinic, her hair covered in a sky-blue veil.

Once settled in a faux-leather chair, Jamila revealed that she, too, feels destabilized by the pandemic.

The Yazidi survivor lives in a one-room tent with her son and four daughters. But she doesn't feel at home.

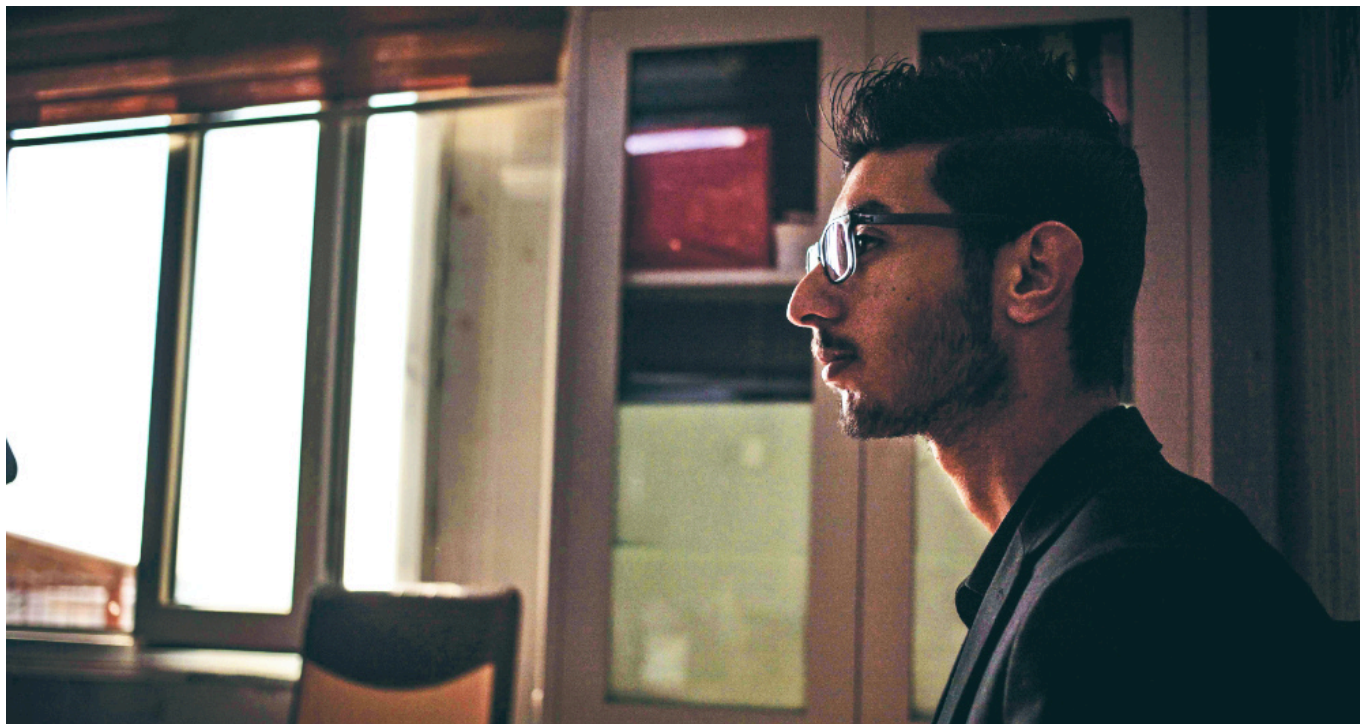
"I have totally abandoned my children. I feel all alone even though they're always at home. I hit them during my panic attacks – I didn't know what else to do," she said.

Othman tried to soothe Jamila, telling her: "Hatred is the result of untreated sadness. We take it out on relatives, especially when we feel devalued – men prey on women, and women on children."

But the trauma is not just an issue for the displaced, specialists warn.

"With the isolation and lack of access to care, children who have lived a genocide develop difficulties as they become adults," said Lina Villa, the head of the mental health unit at a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in northern Iraq.

"We fear suicide rates will go up in the years to come."



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Air strike kills IRGC commander at Iraq-Syria border
Rocket hits small oil refinery in Iraq's north, no casualties -officials

[Gaza imposes tighter virus restrictions, extends curfew](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2020-12-03 19:59

GAZA CITY: New measures to counter the spread of the novel coronavirus in the Gaza Strip were announced on Thursday by the interior ministry of Hamas, which rules the Palestinian enclave.

Mosques, schools, universities and kindergartens will be closed from Saturday in the Gaza Strip, excluding high schools and nurseries, the interior ministry said in a statement.

A night-time curfew was also set to start from Saturday, lasting from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 am, while a full lockdown will be imposed on Fridays and Saturdays from December 11 through to the end of the month.

Shops and other premises must close by 6:00 p.m. and people must be home by 6:30 pm, compared to 8:00 p.m. under the previous curfew rules.

Medical and political sources warned last week of a spike in Covid-19 cases in the Gaza Strip, saying the situation was “out of control.” The enclave, a small, densely populated territory with two million inhabitants under an Israeli blockade, closed its borders early in the pandemic and only allowed a limited number of people to enter, requiring them to isolate for three weeks in quarantine centers. Up until mid-August, authorities in Gaza had only recorded around 100 Covid-19 cases. But in the past two weeks, containment of the virus has deteriorated in Gaza, with hundreds of new infections announced per day, resulting in a total of 23,023 cases and 122 deaths. Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar is among those who have recently been infected by the virus, the movement said Tuesday.





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[**Israel warns Iran may target its facilities abroad**](#)

Thu, 2020-12-03 22:23

JERUSALEM: Israel warned on Thursday that its facilities abroad could be targeted by Iran, which has been issuing new threats against Israel since the killing of a prominent Iranian nuclear scientist.

In its warning, Israel's counter-terrorism bureau said Iran could try to carry out attacks in nearby countries, including Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.

"In light of the threats heard recently by Iranian officials and in light of the involvement in the past of Iranian officials in terror attacks in various countries, there is a concern that Iran will try to act in this way against Israeli targets," said a statement issued by the prime minister's National Security Council.

Iran's clerical and military rulers have blamed Israel for the killing of its top nuclear scientist last week. A top adviser to Iran's supreme leader has said that Iran will give a "calculated and decisive" response.



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[Egypt seeks to free citizens kidnapped by pirates off Nigerian coast](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-03 21:46

CAIRO: Egypt's Foreign Ministry said it was coordinating with Nigerian authorities to free two of its citizens after they were kidnapped by pirates.

According to media reports, Saad Shawky and Kyrolos Samir were taken while they were on board a cargo ship off the coast of Nigeria's southernmost state of Bayelsa.

There are also three Lebanese, four Indians and a Cameroonian in the crew.

The ministry said it had contacted the Egyptian consulate in Abuja about the circumstances and with the latest updates, and that instructions had been issued "to communicate with all officials at the highest level to follow up on ensuring the safety of kidnapped Egyptians."

Egyptian media reported the two men were on board a Lebanese cargo ship called "Milan-1" that was heading from Nigeria to Cameroon. They also said the ship was owned by a Lebanese national, Adnan El-Kot.

El-Kot said in statements that he had rented the ship to a man called Tavo Lawrence and that the vessel was raising the flag of Saint Kitts. He learned about the kidnapping last Thursday, receiving a call from a Thuraya mobile phone from the pirates who demanded a \$1.5 million ransom to release the ship.

The ransom dropped to \$300,000, and El-Kot explained that he had told the kidnapers that the ship had been rented to another person living in Nigeria after he made sure all the ship crew were safe.

Maria Samir, Samir's sister, said her brother was last contacted as he was about to move from Nigeria to Cameroon.

She said in an interview that contact with him was lost a few hours after he moved from Nigeria, adding that it naturally happened due to being in the open seas. She was following up the ship's route through an app that revealed the vessel had stopped in the middle of the sea and did not move.

She said her brother graduated from university a year ago and that it was his first job for six months. She added he was working on a ship on the Red Sea route and moved to work on board "Milan-1."

Sherouk Shawky, who is Shawky's sister, said: "My brother and his colleague Kyrolos Samir have been working together onboard the ship for two years and a half."

She said her brother left Nigeria en route to Cameroon and they had last contacted each other last Wednesday.

She added: "By Saturday, as he didn't contact us, we became extremely worried about him since the route from Nigeria to Cameroon is only two days. So we contacted Adnan El-Kot, the ship owner, who told us that pirates from Nigeria kidnapped the ship's 10-member crew, which includes officers, engineers and cooks. He said the pirates kidnapped 10 crew members and left one to inform Adnan of the kidnapping."



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[People disabled by Beirut explosion stage protest](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-03 21:33

BEIRUT: People disabled by the Aug. 4 Beirut Port explosion staged a sit-in on Thursday to protest against "injustice, corruption and marginalization."

The protest took place in the Basta Al-Tahta neighborhood, where a disabled 87-year-old man called Tawfiq Khawam had set himself alight due to the poverty and neglect he faced. Protesters said they did not want "another Tawfiq Khawam."

They gave vivid testimonies of the deprivation caused by their disabilities, calling for social protection that guaranteed them "basic rights and a decent living in light of the economic collapse."

One woman said the port explosion was a "real crime, yet officials act as if

nothing has happened.”

She urged the “inclusion of fixed standards for the rights of the injured who have suffered a physical disability in the process of rebuilding the destroyed buildings of Beirut,” and for the need to include the issues of the disabled in the reform plan and to treat people who were disabled as a result of the explosion and the army’s wounded equally without discrimination.”

The spokeswoman for the protesters said Lebanon had issued a law about the rights of disabled people 20 years ago, but that parliament had not yet ratified the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities despite 14 years passing since it was issued.

This, she added, was a sign of how Lebanese officials dealt with this category of citizens, who had become “victims of extreme poverty, dreaming of food and medicine and access to public places.”

The protest coincided with an official announcement that President Michel Aoun had signed a law to provide compensation and salaries to the families of the port explosion victims, and “enabling those who were disabled to benefit from health benefits from the National Social Security Fund and from the law related to the rights of people with special needs.”

A study from Beirut Arab University, in cooperation with the Lebanese Army Engineering Directorate and published on Thursday, showed that the blast resulted from the explosion of only 20.5 percent of the 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that were stored near grain silos.

The study said the exploded amount of ammonium nitrate was “much less than the total original quantity, which is equivalent to 220 tons of TNT or the equivalent of 564 tons of ammonium nitrate.”

The judicial investigator has not issued his report, which is expected to reveal the reasons for the explosion.

The blast killed 202 people and injured more than 6,500, some of whom are still in hospital. It destroyed Beirut’s waterfront and inner residential neighborhoods, and came as the country was dealing with a financial crisis and COVID-19.

A British government minister warned on Thursday that Lebanon was on the verge of not being able to feed itself.

James Cleverly, the Foreign Office minister for the Middle East, called the situation [“a man-made problem which could have been prevented.”](#)

“The most pressing danger is the risk to food security: Lebanon is on the verge of not being able to feed itself,” said Cleverly, who met Lebanese officials in Beirut on Thursday. “Four months on from the blast, Lebanon is threatened by a silent tsunami. Lebanon’s leaders must act.”

During a second international conference in support of Beirut and the Lebanese people, held on Wednesday at the invitation of French President

Emmanuel Macron and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the international community expressed concern about the delay in the investigation of the port explosion.

Participants said the commitments made regarding emergency aid since Aug. 4 had been fulfilled, in terms of quality and quantity, in all priority areas identified by the UN at the time.

The conference announced a multi-donor trust fund prepared by the World Bank, the UN and EU, to continue funding after the emergency humanitarian aid allocated after Aug. 4, provided that “an important role is given to civil society actors to identify priority areas of action, such as good governance, health, education, social protection, housing, culture and heritage.”

Participants also expressed their concern about the “deterioration of all economic, financial, monetary and social indicators, as the poverty rate increased from 28 percent to 55 percent within a 12-month period, which has now pushed many Lebanese to emigrate.”

They said that while Lebanon was in a state of financial bankruptcy, it could still be a successful country if the reforms that the population and international community expected were implemented quickly.



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