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Iraq's Young Blood

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With Michael Hastings, Scott Johnson, Ayad Obeidi, Ahmed Obeidi and Mohammed Sadeq in Baghdad, and Christopher Dickey and Karen Fragala Smith in New York

Ammar will tell you he's proud to be carrying a gun. His father was a brigadier in Saddam Hussein's Army, a man who saw combat in his country's several wars, and from an early age Ammar had accompanied him to the shooting range. "I got used to the sound of guns then," Ammar says. So he was ready, last fall, when the imam in his Baghdad neighborhood urged residents to take up arms against the invader--who in this case happened to be members of a Shiite militia trying to push into the predominantly Sunni area. Ammar joined the neighborhood watch, a ragtag bunch of men who stand guard nightly at improvised roadblocks and rooftop observation posts. In mid-October Ammar fought his first big battle against soldiers from the Mahdi Army--"the garbage collectors and robbers," as he contemptuously refers to the Shiite militia. He says he put his Kalashnikov assault rifle to good use: "I think I injured or even killed two of them. Our group killed more than six of them that night."

Ammar is 17 years old. A tall, thin boy with a beard just starting up, he has already seen far more of the dark side of life than anyone really should. As the grisly toll of Baghdad's death squads spiked last fall, he helped out in the room at his local mosque where bodies are ritually washed before they are buried. Some corpses had been burned with chemicals. Limbs had been cut off, eyes torn out. One day at the beginning of November, a neighbor of Ammar's, a college student and fellow Sunni, disappeared at an impromptu checkpoint set up by the Mahdi Army. When the neighbor's body finally turned up at the mosque for burial, Ammar saw that he had been beheaded. (He recognized his friend from the clothing.) "I ran into the garden and threw up," Ammar says. Then he vowed revenge.

Sectarian warfare is reshaping Iraq in all sorts of malevolent ways day in and day out. But it is also forging the future by poisoning the next generation of Iraqis. Like many of its neighbors, Iraq is a young country: nearly half the population is under the age of 18. And those children have had a particularly turbulent upbringing. Kids like Ammar were born in the aftermath of one debilitating war, against neighboring Iran, then suffered two others and years of impoverishing sanctions in between. They are especially vulnerable to the demons that now grip Iraq. Hassan Ali, a sociologist at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, estimates that at least 1 million Iraqi kids have seen their lives damaged by the war--they've lost parents and homes, watched as their communities have been torn apart by sectarian furies. "These children will come to believe in the principles of force and violence," says Ali. "There's no question that society as a whole is going to feel the effects in the future"--and not only Iraqi society. From the Middle East to Europe to America, violence may well beget violence around the world for years to come.

As a fresh wave of U.S. troops heads to Baghdad--part of a last-ditch "surge" meant to stabilize and rebuild the Iraqi capital--it's worth asking whether we've already lost the larger battle in Iraq. Jonathan Powers, a former U.S. Army captain who served in Iraq in 2003 and now directs a nonprofit working with kids there, notes that the ongoing violence is creating a generation that is undereducated, unemployed, traumatized and, among boys in particular, ripe for the vengeful appeals of militias and insurgent groups. Already some of these kids are taking up arms--mostly against members of the opposite sect, whether Sunni or Shia, but often against American troops as well. "Instead of training them to rebuild their country, they are being trained to use weapons to destroy it," Powers says. If the pattern isn't changed, "we will be fighting these same youths in the future for peace in the Middle East."

And beyond. French scholar Gilles Kepel, author of "Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam," warns that many of these kids, raised on anger and fear, are potentially rebels without clear causes. "What will their jihads become?" he asks. "Are they going to grow up to

kill each other, or will they turn their weapons against the West?" If somehow peace can be won, they may give up their guns, says Kepel, as most of those in the war generations of Lebanon, Algeria and the Balkans have done in recent memory.

But what's clear is that we're far closer to the beginning of this cycle of violence than to its end. Al Qaeda is not known to have specifically appealed to Iraq's kids, and most intelligence warnings about the conflict there have focused on the adult jihadists who are gaining on-the-ground experience in the fight. But radical groups have always found their most ready recruits in societies undergoing profound and violent change. The closest analogy may be to the Taliban in Afghanistan. They filled their ranks with the orphans of war--very often refugee kids--and offered them a different kind of family structure cemented by the bonds of Islam.

Iraq is full of such kids. Ask Thaka, a 14-year-old Baghdadi, about soccer or computer games and the gangly boy's finely featured face lights up--brief moments of respite from the burden he so clearly bears. On a warm June evening in 2005, Thaka and his father, Talib, were closing up their clothing shop in the south Baghdad district of Doura. Suddenly an unknown man stepped out of a car parked nearby and, without warning, fired a handgun into Talib's head and body--12 shots, until the magazine was empty. "I still remember the sound of the bullets," says Thaka. "It's like a dream to me." He fled, howling, deep into the city. His family could not find him for hours.

Even now, a year and a half later, Thaka sometimes succumbs to fits of anxiety that his family members quell by holding him down and feeding him sedatives they buy at the local pharmacy. Sadly, his story is not exceptional. A 2006 study by Iraqi psychiatrists, sponsored in part by the World Health Organization, found that 30 percent of the 1,090 children surveyed at schools in Mosul were suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. In Baghdad, 47 percent of those surveyed reported "exposure to a major traumatic event," and 14 percent suffered from symptoms of PTSD. These can include anxiety, depression and nightmares--all of which are particularly damaging to young minds. "Some children wake up in the middle of the night and can't go back to sleep, [worried about] how they're going to school in the morning," says Nail Subhi, who works with an American aid group called Generation Iraq Organization. "Is there going to be someone in the street waiting to kill or kidnap them?" In a February 2006 study published by the Association of Psychologists of Iraq, 92 percent of the kids surveyed showed signs of learning impediments.

Thaka is typical in another sense: he has joined the growing hordes of Iraqis displaced within the country, who now number as many as 1.7 million, according to the United Nations. Thaka's family are Shiites, and before his father's killing they had received anonymous threats warning them to leave their home in predominantly Sunni Doura. Now they find themselves living in a Shiite district where they know no one. Baghdad neighborhoods used to be close-knit places where neighbors shared information and helped out each other regardless of sect or ethnicity. Parents watched after each other's kids; the children had a ready support network. Today, often scarred like Thaka, refugees are surrounded by strangers thrown together by sect and defended by militias.

Once wrecked, these families have little capacity to rebound. While no reliable figures of kids orphaned or left fatherless by the war exist, the overwhelming majority of Iraqi civilians killed in the sectarian slaughter have been men between the ages of 18 and 40. The Iraqi Red Crescent Society says it's been seeing a stark increase in the number of households run by women--a problem in traditional Iraqi society, where women rarely work outside the home. In Fallujah, 17-year-old Jumaa Ahmed al-Issawi had to become the primary breadwinner for his family after his father went into hiding, wanted by the Americans. He still attends high school in the mornings, but then drives a taxi to earn money. "I'm exhausted," the tall, athletic teen says, sighing. "At my age it's hard to bear all these miseries and concerns." A 20-year-old cousin now supports Thaka's extended family of 11 people, once comfortably middle class. Thaka worries that he, too, may be forced to give up school and find a job.

Since September, millions of other kids have had to abandon their education for other reasons. Simply getting to class has become an unacceptable risk for many; schoolchildren in Baghdad can run into a half-dozen or more checkpoints--of the estimated 1,000 in the city--each morning. Lawyer Abu Mohammed Abid Tuayess is a father of three. "I deliver my daughter to school every day," he says. "I've seen kidnappings happen right in front of my eyes when I've been dropping her off." At the beginning of this academic year, schools in two provinces were forced to close by sectarian violence. Hundreds of teachers have been killed, while school buildings have been hit by mortars or shredded by fire fights. Last March Fatima Abdul Melik, 11, was boarding her schoolbus in Baghdad when a dark brown car, filled with masked men, screeched to a halt before her. Then came the loud popping sounds of gunfire. The children, screaming, piled out the open door to confront the bloody corpse of Abu Ali, their once beloved bus driver. After that, Fatima says, she abandoned school for a time: "Even now I start shaking when I hear gunfire."

The Ministry of Education estimates that only 30 percent of the 3.5 million Iraqi elementary-age kids are attending school now, down from 75 percent last year. Given those conditions, "the current situation is crucial for education in 2006-07," says Husam Sabri, a leading UNICEF official in Iraq. While the vast majority of schools remain open and the government has instituted a relocation program for families who want to move their kids to safer areas, millions of children are receiving a sporadic education at best. Sabri worries that entire grades could end up being forced to repeat the year, possibly crippling an already overburdened school system. Um Firas, a supervisor at a Baghdad school, says that teachers are increasingly finding it impossible to teach under such conditions, while children are less inclined to learn. "I assure you that even the students who pass their grade have received not even half of the education they should," she says.

Even worse, the sectarian hatreds roiling society outside have found their way into the classroom. One teacher at a primary school in Baghdad, who asked not to be identified by name for her safety, says many parents pulled their kids out of her school when they learned it was being guarded by the Mahdi Army. "We used to have over 600 kids but now it is no more than 400," she says.

According to her, the number of Sunni children in particular is dwindling, replaced by Shiite youth. She also says the education depends "on what sect the teacher is." Kids in other schools have reported being harassed by teachers because of their overtly Sunni or Shiite names.

All this, say Powers and others, is driving Iraqi kids into the arms of the sectarian gangs that now rule the streets. U.S. troops operating in Doura, scene of some of the worst bloodshed this year, often find themselves painting over graffiti from competing militias on the walls of local schools. "The militias are using them [the schools] to advertise to the kids," says Sgt. 1/c Roger Hunceker, 31. Army intelligence reports say that the Mahdi Army has been handing out toy guns to the area's local kids, who use their slightly-less-than-life-size Kalashnikovs to "play militia" at the same checkpoints where their fathers and uncles will be pulling duty later in the evening. "It's to train the kids to use real weapons, and also to provoke us into killing civilians," says Specialist Raven Jenks, 22.

The gunmen's appeal is seductive, particularly for those like Ammar who have seen their brethren mutilated by death squads. Militia members are the most obviously powerful men in their frightening world. Ali Sadkhan, a 14-year-old Shiite who hails from the holy city of Karbala, also helped wash bodies at his local mosque. "All of them were shot in the head," he says. He estimates that he's helped bury 300 corpses, many of them children. A deeply devout believer, slight and dark, Ali is not physically imposing. "I do not want to be weak like them," he says of the dead, batting away tears. Ali now wears the black shirt and trousers of Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, and says he's received four months of training in light weapons. The United States is striving to create a new Middle East dominated by Israel, he says, and he is ready to stand against "the evil of America."

Ali also says he is grateful to the Mahdi Army for "making a man out of me." That urge, in a land bereft of fathers, cannot be underestimated. At a checkpoint in the embattled Baghdad neighborhood of Saydeeya, 13-year-old Abdullah can barely manage a wisp of a mustache yet handles his AK-47 with a professional's ease. "We try to protect the Shiites here from the beasts," he says, referring to Sunni attackers who he believes are waging a religious war on Shiites with the backing of the U.S. military--a myth common among Shiite children. An orphan long before the present war began, Abdullah lost both of his parents to a car accident when he was 5. He later abandoned his foster family and school, and took to the streets. But like Ali, he's found a new sense of belonging with the Mahdi Army, which makes a point of reaching out to the downtrodden of Iraqi society.

Wearing a scuffed leather jacket and sometimes hiding his face behind a red and white checked scarf, Abdullah spends 10- to 12-hour shifts keeping watch at a makeshift roadblock--palm-tree trunks lying astride the street in his garbage-strewn cinder-block neighborhood. When American patrols near, he and his comrades hide their weapons and melt away. When his shift ends, he takes to the nearby rooftops, scanning for signs of potential danger. The older men treat him with respect, and his comrades are quick to carry out his orders. Abdullah has no illusions. He has long since abandoned his cherished dream of going back to school and studying to become a lawyer, and describes his current life as a "nightmare." But someone has to protect his people, and he is proud to fulfill his duty. His salary is all that keeps his two young sisters fed.

Money clearly is another element of the militias' allure. Iraqi and U.S. soldiers in the capital trade tales of kids working as spotters, couriers and fighters. Powers likes to point out that when he served in Iraq the going rate to have an IED planted was \$1,000, with another \$1,000 paid for killing an American. Now, he says, kids will set bombs for as little as \$20. Ahmed Ali, 10, was on his way to school in Baghdad one morning when a "smiling man" called him over and asked for his help. The man offered him the princely sum of \$35 in return for carrying a canvas bag to a spot nearby. No sooner had Ahmed completed the delivery than he was knocked to the ground by an enormous blast. "I fell down on my face, screaming. I couldn't stop screaming," he recalls. A woman and her child were injured by the bomb.

All too many of Iraq's kids, however, need no added incentive to join the fight. Jumaa, the Fallujah high-school student, was himself detained by the Americans in September 2005, when he was 16 years old. U.S. forces raided his house searching for his father, a Baath Party member and insurgency sympathizer. In his absence, they took Jumaa instead. He says the Americans handcuffed him, blindfolded him and held him at a nearby U.S. base. According to him, the Americans left him alone for 24 hours with no food or water. He ended up staying there for two months, until he was transferred to the Iraqi security forces, who, he says, tortured him for three months until he was released. Now he longs to kill Americans. "I will carry a weapon," he declares. "I will fight them to defend my land, country and religion."

After revealing in 2004 that it was holding 107 suspected insurgents under the age of 16 in detention camps in Iraq, the United States has refused to release any figures about the number of Iraqi kids in custody. But U.S. forces have repeatedly found themselves facing underage fighters on the battlefield, says Peter Singer of the Brookings Institution. Aid workers say such child soldiers are often the most difficult to reintegrate into society. Uprooted and uneducated, those who have laid down their arms are easily enticed to resume fighting. Dan Toole, director of emergency programs for UNICEF, is a veteran of conflicts from Rwanda to Afghanistan. He says that outsiders often underestimate how long it takes for a society to recover from bouts of ethnic cleansing. The changes taking place in Iraq now, he says, are "going to change how people live for generations to come."

Can anything be done? Powers's group, War Kids Relief, is setting up a series of youth centers around the country that will offer kids jobs picking up garbage, painting buildings, etc., for part of the month, and vocational training the rest. The Ministry of Higher Education says some 10,000 students and 400 teachers have taken advantage of its program to relocate kids to safer schools.

"There is a huge amount of resilience in children," says UNICEF child-protection officer Amanda Melville. Most can recover from traumatic experiences with the proper support mechanisms--"someone they can trust to talk to, social activities to engage in, a sense of the community being there to support them, a chance to play sports or find a meaningful role in society that is not violent."

The problem is that those are precisely the opportunities that the war is destroying. The exodus of middle-class Iraqis--some 2 million refugees now live outside the country--has eviscerated the least sectarian slice of society. Even if there were soccer leagues to join anymore, many parents are too scared to let their kids play outside. Relatives and neighbors daily trade tales of vicious killings; the most stable authority figure in many communities is now the imam. The longer U.S. troops stay in Iraq, and the more of them there are, the more they are blamed for the country's ills. A State Department poll last summer found that nine out of 10 young Sunnis and Shiites saw the Americans as an occupying force.

Whether Iraq's next generation can break out of this cycle of violence may depend on the kids themselves. Thaka, the boy who saw his father killed before his eyes, is an example. Even now, despite his traumas, he resists the urge for revenge. A studious practitioner of his faith, Thaka finds consolation in the suffering of the great Shiite imams and the belief that a new age of justice and peace is about to dawn. Asked if he wants to kill his father's murderers, he shakes his head: "I don't want to become like them. They are men without religion." As the children of Iraq are drawn deeper into its tragic conflict, they--and their faith in a better future--still remain the country's best hope.

Photo: A 13-year-old shiite on guard at a checkpoint in East Baghdad

Photo: At Al-Noor Primary School, in a Sunni neighborhood north of Baghdad, students are no longer allowed to sit at desks near the windows. Mortars have struck the building at least five times since October.

Photo: A YOUNGSTER GRIEVES FOR A FAMILY MEMBER KILLED IN A U.S. STRIKE ON SADR CITY, 2004

Photo: A 4-YEAR-OLD GUEST CELEBRATES A FRIENDS BIRTHDAY AT BAGHDADS POSH HUNTING CLUB

Photo: A Baghdad 13-year-old visits the empty home of relatives who have fled the killing

Photo: A venturesome Iraqi toddler peers out from a kitchen door while members of the 1-23 Infantry, Third Stryker Brigade, Second Infantry Division, search his home for weapons during a neighborhood sweep in Baghdad

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