The War Children of Iraq

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The first time Captain Scott Southworth went to the Baghdad orphanage for disabled children in 2003, a 10 year-old boy with cerebral palsy dragged himself across the floor to the soldier, gave him a crooked smile and began playing with his watch. The orphan, Ala'a, was found abandoned on the street at age three and had lived with the nuns running the Catholic orphanage ever since. Every time Southworth visited, Ala'a went directly to him and eventually began calling him "Baba," or Daddy, in Arabic.

One day, the Iraqi doctor who treated the orphans pulled Southworth aside and told him that Ala'a would soon be sent to a state-run institution for older children and disabled adults. "If he goes there," the doctor said, "his life will be over."

"Best case scenario, he would stare at a wall for the rest of life and someone would change his diapers," Southworth said. "Worst case scenario, he would die."

That's when Southworth, single and 32 at the time, decided to adopt him. Unbeknownst to Southworth, who trained Iraqi police as head of the Wisconsin Army National Guard 32nd Military Police Company from June 2003 to July 2004, he would spend more than six months finagling his way through tricky immigration law, $20,000 in legal fees and collaboration with people around the globe, which culminated in what he called "the immigration case of the century." Southworth finally secured a rarely-granted temporary humanitarian parole visa for Ala'a, and the boy has been living in Juneau County, Wisconsin for 20 months now, happily enrolled in the fifth grade.

Because of Southworth, who was elected District Attorney of his county while serving in Iraq, Ala'a had politicians, judges and doctors fighting for him in Iraq and the United States. But for most of the thousands of orphans in the country, the future looks grim. Reports on sectarian violence, kidnappings and the struggling Iraqi government flood the daily news, but one of the untold stories of the Iraq War is the sad fate of the increasing number of children orphaned by the fighting.

According to a 2005 report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the wing of the U.S. State Department in charge of American foreign assistance, there are an estimated 5,000 orphans in Baghdad and as many as 2,500 more across the country. Of those in the capital, thousands live on the street. And these estimates may not even include the country's new class of "economic orphans," children left to fend for themselves because their families can no longer provide for them.

In April of this year, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, which oversees orphan services through the Orphan House Department, told the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (UNHCR) reporting agency, IRIN, that the 23 orphanages across the country were capable of housing only about 1,600 orphans, just a third of the estimated number country-wide. And according to the department's director, Abeer Mahdi al-Chalabi, only 642 children were registered in the seven orphanages in Baghdad, where the need is greatest.

An increased number of orphans is always a byproduct of conflict, but according to UNICEF, the problem of street children "simply did not exist" before the 1991 Gulf War, when a United States-led coalition drove

then President Sadaam Hussein's forces out of Kuwait. Following the quick defeat, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions, disrupting infrastructure, shocking the economy and cutting off food and medicine to the most vulnerable Iraqis. At least fifty-thousand children died in 1991 alone, and hundreds of thousands more followed throughout the 1990s because of the dire conditions wrought by the sanctions. The conflict of the last three years has only exacerbated the situation for those under 18, who make up more than half of Iraq's population of almost 27 million.

In March 2003, the U.S. invaded Iraq on the premise that the country had not abandoned its nuclear and chemical weapons development program in defiance of numerous UN resolutions, that Sadaam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and that his government had links to Al Qaeda, all later proved false. President Bush declared the end of major combat operations less than two months later, removing Sadaam Hussein from office and terminating more than three decades of Baath Party rule. More than 140,000 US troops are still stationed in Iraq training local security forces, overseeing the fledgling democractic process and trying to maintain security in an increasingly violent environment that many are calling civil war. Over the past three years, more than 2,600 US troops and an estimated 45,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed as a result of the conflict.

As deadly bombings and economic insecurity increase, so does the number of Iraq's orphans and street children. Coincidentally, most of the orphanages in Baghdad are located in Adhamiya, a Sunni pocket in a Shia area and one of the most violent parts of the city. In the midst of the myriad problems facing the country, no one has chosen to address the situation thus far.

What will happen to these children stuck in the midst of chaos? How should the new Iraqi government deal with them? What role, if any, should the U.S. play in addressing the situation of orphans of a conflict they started? And what are the consequences of not dealing with this growing marginalized population?

Thirty years ago, international adoption was thought to be the answer.

At the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, there were an estimated 70,000 orphans in Vietnam, many of them fathered by American GIs, ill or disabled. As Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces, President Gerald Ford ordered the evacuation of several thousand children orphaned by the war. In one month, thirty U.S. military and commercial flights brought an estimated 2,500 orphans to the U.S. and 1,300 to Canada, Europe and Australia. Even President Ford adopted a Vietnamese girl. Not surprisingly, however, the mandate dubbed "Operation Babylift" was mired in the heated emotions and divided opinions that surrounded the war.

Supporters viewed the mission as an effort to save children whose futures were doomed, but critics saw it as an American publicity stunt, an attempt to save face as Saigon caved to an enemy the U.S. military had failed to defeat at the cost of 58,000 American and almost 4 million Vietnamese lives. A petition signed by professors of ethics and religion at Stanford and the University of California – Berkeley on April 4, 1975 stated that "the only reason for bringing the children here is to salve our conscience, and children should not be used in that way."

Still others asserted that the children's relatives may have been displaced by war, and thus the children were not truly orphans nor properly given up for adoption. Documents were often incomplete or missing. Indeed, a class action lawsuit was filed in California against President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger regarding improper procedures in the processing of visas for the evacuated adoptees. The case

was eventually dismissed, but some Vietnamese parents who emigrated to the U.S. later began looking for their children.

Overall, research shows that the adoptees of Operation Babylift adjusted well to resettlement in their respective countries, and most directly involved in the evacuation have positive opinions about it.

Stephanie Johnson*, a 31 year-old homemaker and Babylift adoptee in Atlanta, told me, "Babies born into this world do not have a choice of where they will grow up and who their parents will be."

"Operation Babylift gave these children who would be possibly left to die a chance for a different life," she said.

And according to Sally Vinyard, a member of the evacuation team at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon at the time, "Operation Babylift may be the only good thing that came out of the war."

Just as the Vietnam War dramatically altered many Americans' views toward their country's foreign policy, Operation Babylift had a profound effect on international adoption. Concerns about the harried processing of orphans during the evacuations brought attention to the importance of "family tracing," or determining whether there are existing family members who might take in a child before he or she is given up for adoption. Most aid agencies like UNICEF and Save the Children now stipulate two years as an appropriate time period to attempt to locate parents or other relatives in times of crises before releasing a child for adoption.

Concerns like these played a major role in the formation of the most important international agreement to date governing international adoption, The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, which came into force in 1995. It aims to establish safeguards that ensure that intercountry adoptions are in the best interests of the child and to set up a system of cooperation among contracting states to prevent the abduction, sale of and trafficking of children. Forty-six nations have signed on to the convention thus far, and the U.S will finalize its ratification of the treaty next year.

Historically, international adoption has boomed after wars. After World War II, American families adopted European orphans, mainly from Italy, Germany and Greece. The war in Korea sparked adoptions of Korean children, many of whom were Amerasians, or children of American soldiers and Korean mothers. And more children were adopted from Vietnam during Operation Babylift than in the past thirty years.

Media coverage of children caught in the midst of war and American soldiers' contact with foreign populations have triggered these adoption movements, and Iraq is no different. In June of this year, NBC's program, The Daily Nightly, reran a story on a girls' orphanage in Baghdad in response to "so many viewers [who] have written wanting to open their homes and offer Iraqi children new lives." And the U.S. State Department has posted a notice on its website specifically regarding adoption from Iraq in response to the "many inquiries from American citizens concerned about the plight of the children of Iraq." Considering that Americans take in their care four out of every five internationally adopted children, it's not surprising that they see adoption as a reasonable response to help children in times of conflict, just as they did 30 years ago.

Initially quiet, comparisons between the current conflict and the Vietnam War have grown louder in politics, academia and the media. Critics cite the parallels in the U.S. entering the war on false premises, participation in an ideologically-driven conflict and the Bush's administration plummeting approval ratings. The number of casualties and orphaned children are nowhere near those in Vietnam, but no end to the conflict is yet in sight. Could international adoption be the answer again for the growing number of street children and orphans in Iraq?

Not any time soon most likely, for both legal and religious reasons. Iraq inherited Britain's secular legal system, but when it comes to adoption, it is Islamic or Shariah law that governs, which does not recognize adoption. At first glance, this seems particularly strange given that Islam's most revered prophet, Mohammed, was an orphan and raised an orphan himself.

According to Dr. Imad-Ad-Dean Ahmad, an American-Muslim scholar and professor of religion in society at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, "the importance of taking homeless children in to care for them is well-established in Islam."

"It is actually somewhat startling to hear Muslims assert that adoption is prohibited in Islam," he wrote in a 1999 essay commissioned by the National Council for Adoption to dispel this myth and encourage more Muslim parents to adopt. "The confusion is over the precise definition of the term."

Ahmad explained the Islamic system of *kafala,* which comes from the root meaning "to feed" and is a form of sponsorship most similar to the concept of a foster parent in the West.

"An adoptive parent is expected to raise the child as if it is his or her own to the extent that he or she provides shelter, food, nurturing and a family environment," Ahmad told me. "However, the child is still the proper heir of its natural parents and should therefore not be deprived of the property of its natural parents."

In legal terms, *kafala* translates as a system of legal guardianship in Iraq, where parents may provide for and protect an orphan but cannot consider the child their own. In the Islamic context, where kinship and blood ties are emphasized above all else, adoptive parents do not take the place of biological parents; rather, they are trustees of *someone else's* child. This notion of guardianship can be traced to other religious laws concerning identity, property and marriage.

According to Shariah, an adopted child must retain his or her biological name and cannot change it to match that of the adoptive family. In Iraq, Muslim Arab names signify one's ancestry, religious sect and region of birth. A person's surnames (there are usually at least two) can indicate paternal lineage up to six generations back. Changing a child's last name is seen as erasing their and their father's identity.

Furthermore, an adoptive child inherits property from his or her biological parents, not automatically from the adoptive parents. Guardians may choose to give property to an adopted child, but only through an official will. Lastly, because the lack of blood ties between the adoptee and adoptive family is always known, a child taken in through *kafala* is permitted to marry members of the adoptive family as an adult.

In contrast, adoption in the West is based on the idea of considering an adopted child one's own, a belief that is clearly reflected in American adoption law. According to most adoption laws in the U.S., which vary

from state to state, adoptive parents are required to give their child their last name, and adopted children automatically become heirs of their adoptive parents' property, both of which go against Shariah law.

"We call it an adoption and to us it means you are my child, and there are no differences," Southworth said. "But Muslims don't view it that way."

"It's more like your father is not there, so somebody else will step in and care for you," he said, "but you always have a father; you just don't know who he is."

From the American perspective, distinguishing an adopted child from a biological one may seem like cruelly calling attention to his or her differences, but Ahmad pointed out what he saw as some of the advantages of the Islamic system.

"For a very long time in the U.S., it was considered a stigma to be adopted and children were not told they were adopted, let alone who their natural parents were," he explained. "There are obvious negative medical consequences but spiritual and cultural reasons as well."

"Children should have an understanding of what their cultures are," he continued. "They usually take great pride in the culture of their ancestors."

Americans have adopted more than 230,000 foreign children since 1989, and the numbers continue to rise. Indeed, international adoption has taken on a sort of glamour as high profile celebrities have chosen to adopt babies from overseas. Most recently, Hollywood actress and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie adopted babies from Cambodia and Ethiopia. Naturally, as the phenomenon has become more common and more visible, past stigmas associated with it have decreased over time. In this respect, Ahmad believes the American notion of adoption is actually moving toward that in Islam as parents are encouraged to teach adopted children about their countries and cultures of origin. He also pointed out that many adopted children attempt to find their birth parents.

"It's just a fact that both nature and nurture contribute to who we are," he said. "We shouldn't be surprised that adopted children have a desire to know who and what their biological parents are like."

Southworth says there is no question as to Ala'a's cultural origin or who his father is. He has an Iraqi flag hanging in his bedroom in Wisconsin, but he chose to call Southworth "Baba" on his own. According to Southworth, Ala'a has always decided things for himself. He chose his own name and his religion, Christianity, even though he was most certainly abandoned by a Muslim family.

In Iraq, the law automatically declares all orphans Muslim. In fact, the nuns of the Catholic orphanage would take Ala'a to pray secretly in a separate room of the orphanage. Iraqi law also states that orphans must be adopted by a Muslim living in Iraq, criteria which Southworth obviously did not fit.

Although there are thousands of orphans in Iraq right now, orphans and orphanages are actually not indigenous to Iraqi or other Muslim cultures. Children whose parents die are supposed to be taken into the folds of their extended family, usually by an uncle or grandparent. But according to UNICEF, normal family networks have been severely disrupted since the 2003 U.S. led invasion. An estimated 40,000 Iraqis have been displaced by the current sectarian violence, nearly half of them children.

It's also clear that Ahmad's open-minded views on adoption aren't shared by many Muslims in Iraq. Orphans are highly stigmatized, and disabled children are often the first to be abandoned or given to an institution for cultural and economic reasons. These factors leave no avenues for international adoption but no system of internal adoption either.

"Ala'a's chances of being adopted in Iraq were less than zero," Southworth said.

"That was the quagmire," he said. "They wouldn't adopt him, but they wouldn't let anyone else adopt him either."

Shariah law and prejudice aside, Southworth said that individuals throughout Iraq were supportive of him adopting Ala'a and crucial in getting the boy to the U.S.

While there, he talked to two Iraqi juvenile judges and Iraqi police who worked close with the judicial system. Knowing adoption was illegal, one judge told him, "Put him in your car, drive him out of Iraq and never bring him back," a feat Southworth could probably have accomplished by bribing his way to Jordon or Kuwait. His translator told him to buy Ala'a a black market *agensiya*, or Iraqi identification card, which might help secure his passage. It would have cost about ten dollars.

"I'll say, it was very tempting to get a black market *agensiya*," Southworth said, "and I almost did it."

"But it was important that we did things the right way, even if they were frustrating," he went on. "If I'm the head of a military police company teaching law and order to nearly 1,000 Iraqi police service members in Baghdad, saying that the rule of law is important, explaining that human rights and democracy are important, etcetera, and suddenly I do something illegal according to their law, what example does that set?"

To his surprise, when Southworth wrote the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs for permission to be Ala'a's legal guardian, he received it.

But then he had to deal with U.S. law. As he put it, "you would think adopting Ala'a was like bringing a Martian into the country."

The Iraqis were willing to permit Southworth to take Ala'a under *kafala*, which U.S. officials refused to do. If Iraqi law officially forbade "adoption" as viewed by U.S. law, Ala'a couldn't enter the country. Realizing traditional adoption was not an option, Southworth found a highly recommended immigration lawyer in Minneapolis, who said "humanitarian parole" might be his only hope of getting Ala'a into the country.

Humanitarian parole can only be granted "for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit" and "cannot be used to circumvent normal visa-issuing procedures." The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security reviews applications on a case-by-case basis and signs off on only a handful of cases a year, usually for urgent medical care, which was Southworth's plea for Ala'a.

In January, 2005, Ala'a case was approved. Southworth's translator in Baghdad received word, drove the boy out of the city on the notoriously dangerous stretch of highway leading to the Baghdad airport and got him on a plane to Jordon. Southworth met him there, and they were both in Wisconsin 48 hours later.

In January of this year, Southworth renewed Ala'a's humanitarian parole visa, which lasts a year, and the boy continues to receive medical care and attend school. Southworth is still not sure when he'll be able to officially adopt Ala'a, but he can't imagine anyone making the boy return.

As for the other orphans Ala'a lived with in Iraq, they are probably worse off than when he last saw them. Poverty and violence are hurting already strained orphanages, and the number of street children has more than doubled since the beginning of the war. The problem is worst in Baghdad, where children can regularly be seen sifting through trash, begging and sniffing glue for a cheap high. The prevalence of street children is indicative of the dire situation Iraqi children face as the violence in their country rages.

Just prior to the 1991 Gulf War, the UN described Iraq as a "high-middle income country." Although the Iran-Iraq war caused enormous economic damage and more than 100,000 deaths, Iraq's health, education and other social programs continued to advance throughout the 1980s. Nearly all urban dwellers had access to clean drinking water as did 72 percent of rural residents. Ninety-three percent of Iraqis had access to basic health services. The 1991 Gulf War resulted in a complete breakdown in all of these areas. Food and medical supplies and distribution broke down, and the death rates of children from infectious diseases and malnutrition more than doubled during the 1990s.

Since the U.S. invasion in 2003, the situation has gotten even worse. Last year, Jean Ziegler, the U.N. Human Rights Commission's special expert on the right to food said that the rate of malnutrition among Iraqi children had almost doubled since Sadaam Hussein's ouster in 2003. Under the former dictator, the under-five malnutrition rate was four percent, but the latest figures put it at eight percent, or more than two million children. That rate is roughly equal to that of Burundi, an African nation ravaged by war, and it is higher than in Haiti and Uganda, countries also plagued by recurring violence.

Furthermore, school attendance has plummeted across the country. Only an estimated 65 percent of children attend elementary and secondary school. In Baghdad, the figure could be as low as 50 percent. The rest stay home out of fear or are forced to spend their days peddling trinkets or small goods on the streets to help their families survive. The trafficking of children, especially girls, has also surged. In June 2006, Omar Khalif, the vice-president of the Iraqi Families Association (IFA), a non-governmental organization that registers cases of missing children, told IRIN that at least five children were disappearing every week, most likely sold to families in other countries or forced into prostitution.

Observing the worsening effects on Iraqi children firsthand is what propelled Jon Powers, who spent 14 months in Najaf and Baghdad as a Captain of the Army's 1st Armored Division, to try to address the situation.

Powers, who was featured in a nationally acclaimed documentary on the Iraq War, *Gunner Palace*, is now the Program Manager of War Kids Relief, a project he initiated with the Nobel Peace Prize-winning humanitarian organization, Vietnam Veterans for America (VVA). His project aims to assist orphans, street children and other disenfranchised youth in Iraq. Like Southworth, Powers' visits to orphanages in Baghdad had a lasting effect on him.

"The kids made me feel human again, and not like a machine," said Powers, 28.

"We'd take our gear off, put our weapons away," he described. "We couldn't speak a lick of the language, but it didn't matter. They couldn't speak a lick of English, but we just played soccer, we had them on our shoulders, and they just had a good image of what the Americans were, because of that."

For many soldiers, Powers said, these visits provided a sense of purpose that in many ways had been lost.

"We were sent there for weapons of mass destruction. Oh, there's no weapons of mass destruction. But, lo and behold, here's a society that has been oppressed for a long time," Powers said. "A lot of guys just adopted that as why we should be there."

Southworth echoed this sentiment.

"What going to the orphanage did was put a face to the Iraqi people that was different than what they saw every day," he said. "And we saw children who didn't see us just as American."

"It helped keep things in perspective because we were always dealing with insurgents and terrorists," he added.

As electricity failed to be restored, sewage rotted in the streets and violence persisted, opinions of the U.S. military plummeted. Powers described with frustration how he watched average Iraqis' opinions of the U.S. occupation change.

When he first arrived, the soldiers were dining in people's homes and playing with kids on the street. Months later, he recalled, "One guy said to me, 'Americans have gone to moon; why can't they just provide us with electricity?'"

Early in his tour, Powers described, "I could go out with a patrol to buy a watermelon, talk to the shopkeepers, swing by the orphanages, stop by the mosque, and there was just an American face out there, and it was a good face."

But then roadside bombs started to appear more often.

"To fight them, we hardened up," Powers said. "Vehicles were armored, guys weren't hanging out of their tanks giving candy to kids."

"The American face became this humvee or armored vehicle," he said. "And Americans would just roll into town shooting hell into the neighborhood because you didn't know who was laying the bombs."

"But the Iraqis don't," he corrected himself, "or they *didn't* want to hurt us."

Powers became more and more discouraged as he watched relations falter between the U.S. military and Iraqi citizens. The final straw for him came in early 2004, eight months into his tour, when the caretaker of St. Hannah's orphanage told him that the troops couldn't return because they had received a threat. A group of militia had told her they would kill the children if the nuns continued to associate with the Americans.

Other than the days when Powers' fellow soldiers were killed, "that day looms as the darkest in my 14 months in Iraq," he said.

But that frustration was part of what inspired Powers to come back to Iraq as a civilian and start War Kids Relief with VVA in Washington D.C.

When Powers returned from Iraq to his hometown of Williamsville, New York, in September 2004, "he wanted nothing to do with Iraq," he said. He started teaching at a local school and researching graduate school programs. But while touring U.S. cities with Michael Tucker, the director of *Gunner's Palace*, to promote the film, Powers spoke with humanitarian workers and families who had lost their sons and daughters in the war. He began to see a connection between those orphans and street kids in Iraq and the Americans who had died fighting there. For him, helping marginalized youth became not only a humanitarian issue, but one of national security as well.

A year later, Powers found himself back in Iraq, this time as a civilian interested in starting a youth development program that would engage orphans, street children and other at-risk youth in the social and economic reconstruction process of their country. He met with different national ministries, USAID and UNICEF and got the same response from all of them.

"We don't do orphanages," they told him. "They're not long term solutions."

Since 2003, USAID has committed well over 5 billion dollars to reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Of that amount, 3 percent was earmarked for education projects, mostly in the form of rebuilding schools, supplying textbooks and training teachers. Even though half of Iraq's population is under 18, zero dollars have gone to youth development projects that seek to actively involve youth in reconstruction efforts outside of traditional education.

"What I found frustrating is that the World Bank and the big development agencies have long term goals, but they're not filling the short term needs" Powers said.

"They'll argue that we have higher issues than helping these kids out, but I would disagree," he continued. "I would say we need to develop, as a nation, a youth policy if we're going into a country where 61 percent of the population is under 25."

Powers may be ahead of the game.

"Research has shown that post-conflict governments and the humanitarian community consistently overlook youth's needs and, more importantly, their potential in reconstructing a country," wrote Carl Tripplehorn, Save the Children's Emergency Education Specialist, in a forward-thinking report released this year. Re-establishing schools is common, and obviously important, but thus far post-conflict interventions have failed to see the potential in involving youth—or the harm in not doing so.

"Typically, youth are not viewed as 'strong investments' because they lack the business skills, community connections, literacy and numeracy to succeed," Tripplehorn wrote. "But just as youth can be mobilized for conflict, they can be mobilized for reconstruction."

In Sadr City, a low-income Shia city ruled by Shiite cleric and insurgency leader, Moqtada Al-Sadr, there lives a militia made up entirely of 15 year olds. The under-14 wing of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison houses more than 100 children, almost all boys. These child prisoners have been accused of acting as informants for radical groups, laying improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and firing weapons at American and Iraqi forces. Is it religious zeal that drives these children? Why are those so young willing to risk imprisonment and death?"

"It's not just because they're radicals or terrorists," Powers said.

"When I was in Iraq in 2003, intelligence would tell us that to lay a roadside bomb, the insurgency would pay someone $1,000, and if they killed an American, they would get another $1,000," Powers explained. "Now, it's under $20. There's a kid in Abu Ghraib who did it for a pack of cigarettes."

In fact, "paid-for-hire insurgents" are becoming more and more common, and orphans and street children who have lost their support systems are prime targets for radical groups. A lack of resources combined with despair at losing family members in a violent climate makes them all the more vulnerable to recruitment by extremists. And right now, there are few alternatives.

"For the large numbers of street children, drug use and glue-sniffing serve as a quick but toxic escape from the reality of their lives," wrote retired Lt. Col. Ed O'Connell in a 2006 report on radical youth movements for the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization in Washington D.C. O'Connell, a senior defense analyst at RAND, has interviewed prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, including children.

"Others are drawn too easy into petty criminality and from there, into the insurgency," he wrote. "The alternative is that Government or Coalition Forces hand them five dollars, and they stick to cleaning up trash now ubiquitous around the city."

Part of the problem as well is the psychological effect of the war on children. In February of this year, the Association of Psychologists of Iraq (API) released a study based on interviews with more than 1,000 children countrywide and found that grave mental health problems prevail as a result of the widespread violence.

According to an API spokesman, "the only things they have on their minds are guns, bullets, death and a fear of the U.S. occupation." And a traumatized, disengaged and impoverished youth is one most susceptible to extremist causes. They have a pessimistic outlook on their future and no promise of being involved in rebuilding their communities or country.

Furthermore, "younger youth in particular lack the ability to use abstract thought to project their actions into the future or to understand the consequences of certain acts," Tripplehorn wrote.

According to Powers, the most neglected in Iraq – out-of-school youth (OSY), orphans, ex-combatants and other vulnerable groups of school-age youth represent social capital of great importance to the future of Iraq. Powers' ultimate goal is to have Iraqi youth contribute to revitalizing and sustaining economic growth in their communities, which could translate to growth at the regional and national level as well. If the program helps to alleviate poverty in the targeted communities, at-risk youth will be less vulnerable to radical ideas and can contribute to economic stability.

Powers hopes to achieve this by providing young people with education, vocational training, employment opportunities and the chance to interact with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. By using the existing infrastructure of 100 Youth Centers in Iraq, the program seeks to serve the 20 percent of young Iraqi society that cannot access services through the formal Iraqi educational system. Crucial to the core strategy is engaging community level stakeholders – including the Ministry of Youth and Sport, Ministry of Education, local leaders, religious organizations, police and others—to develop a culturally appropriate program that provides hope and opportunities to youth who are becoming increasingly disengaged from society.

For just $50,000, Powers can refurbish a youth center, complete with computers and the generators still necessary to supply power. For $200,000, he can run such a center for 2 years. He called these amounts "rounding errors" compared to the more than 300 billion dollars spent on the war already.

So how does Powers plan on reaching these young people?

"The same way the jihadists do it," he said. "You go through the Imans, the tribal sheiks—they know where these kids are.

"We didn't understand that at first when we were spreading democracy," he mentioned. "We missed the punch there because they're the guys who understand the community."

In fact, the only group he knew of that was providing services like vocational training to Iraqi youth was Islamic Hand, a local charity that he compared to the Palestinian militant group and political party, Hamas. They're winning the "so-called hearts and minds" of young people, he said, not international aid agencies.

"It has become increasingly obvious that the success of terrorist movements rests on the vulnerability of youth worldwide," wrote O'Connell in his analysis on radical youth movements. "Where we have not put as much effort is toward helping mentally, emotionally and physically displaced Iraqi youth build lives for themselves."

Powers and O'Connell represent some of the very few voices that see the ongoing conflict in Iraq as a "youth issue." It's no surprise that security, governance and the rebuilding of infrastructure in Baghdad take priority over the plight of orphans and street children. But if the younger generation in Iraq will determine the long-term viability of nation-building and democracy, policies that view them as an investment could bring stability to the country and help combat growing anti-Americanism in the region. Indeed, Iraq's population is emblematic of the Middle East, where more than half of the entire region's population is also under 18.

"Twenty or 30 years from now, all these kids will be 30 or 40 years old," Southworth pointed out. "If they grow up hating the West, it will definitely impact American security."

Time will tell how Ala'a's views toward his birth country and the U.S. will develop. His presence may influence how one small town in Wisconsin sees the people of a country the U.S. invaded. But unless international adoption laws change, he'll be a lone example. As of now, most children like him remain powerless.

“No matter what your politics are, they had nothing to do with why we were there initially,” Powers said. “They weren’t part of the regime. They’re the most innocent victims, and we’ve just left them floundering.”

And if Powers is right, unless the Iraqi and American governments provide opportunities for the increasing number of children like Ala’a, they may end up fighting them later.