



Karamatuna كَرَامَتُنَا

An Investigation into the Sex Trafficking of Iraqi Women and Girls in Syria and Jordan

Paper Prepared for the Women Solidarity for an Independent and Unified Iraq Conference of 9th April 2011



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Introduction to the Karamatuna Programme

SCEME (Social Change through Education in the Middle East) launched the Karamatuna (“Our Dignity”) programme on the occasion of International Women’s Day, 8th March 2011.

The Karamatuna programme addresses human rights abuses of Iraqi women and girls and supports their voices to be heard. This programme focuses, in particular, on the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation and is greatly needed because it addresses this serious problem within some Middle Eastern countries; an issue which otherwise receives little domestic or international exposure.

Our aim is to educate the international community through spreading awareness about, and understanding of, the realities of the sex trafficking of Iraqi women and girls in the Middle East and move towards the recommendation and implementation of responses to address, challenge and eliminate such sex trafficking and provide support and a new future for its victims.

This conference paper follows the 8th March 2011 release of a Fact Sheet, published as a Call to Action in support of Iraqi victims of trafficking in the Middle East and precedes the launch of our full preliminary research paper into the issue at question; all of which amount to the initial stages of an ongoing programme against sex trafficking of Iraqi women in the Middle East, which we will work tirelessly to achieve until our aim is met.



What is Sex Trafficking?

A definition ascribed to the term 'sex trafficking' and the one referred to in the course of this paper is sex trafficking as 'the recruitment, transportation (within national or across international borders), transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation. Sexual trafficking is accomplished by means of fraud, deception, threat of or use of force, abuse of a position of vulnerability, and other forms of coercion'.¹ Such trafficking and sexual exploitation and prostitution of women and girls has long existed in Iraq, as has forced marriage and domestic servitude.² However, with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the chaos and anarchy that have therefore come to dominate the country in its wake, Iraq became a major source of victims of trafficking who are now being transported to neighbouring Middle Eastern countries, notably Syria and Jordan. The neglect of authorities to deal with this problem effectively has fostered a state of impunity in which crimes against women are neglected and the offenders go unpunished. It is troubling that domestic violence, rape and other forms of gender based violence have become a common practice among the internally displaced persons in Iraq and the large refugee communities in Syria, Jordan, Egypt and other countries of the MENA region.³

Iraqi women are being subjected to the following types of trafficking:⁴

- 1) Exploitation of prostitution
- 2) Forced labour or services
- 3) Slavery or practices similar to slavery and
- 4) Servitude

¹ The Protection Project (2000)

² Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (2010)

³ See, for example, IRIN (2008) and IRIN (2009)

⁴ Heartland Alliance (2007)



It is estimated that approximately 4,000 Iraqi women, one fifth of whom are under 18, disappeared between 2003 and 2007. Many of these are believed to have been both nationally and internationally trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation by organized criminal networks and by members of their own families.⁵

Professional traffickers target young girls and women whilst they are still inside the Iraqi borders. These traffickers, very often women, target young girls who have left their families (for reasons of fear of violence, abuse, forced marriage or the threat of honour crimes) typically in places such as public transportations in larger cities. Kidnapped, the girls may be kept for a period of time while negotiations on their prices are undertaken, before they are sold on.⁶

In other cases, male solicitors are recruited by trafficking gangs. These men are used to lure vulnerable young girls, eventually persuading them to elope whereby; again, they will be sold for sexual servitude.⁷ Some taxi drivers, too, are used as recruiters to lure girls with the false pretence of help, whereas women who are already involved in the sex industry are used as intermediaries who again pretend to offer assistance, offering to bring the girls to shelters when, in fact, they bring them to brothels.⁸

Syria

The two main destinations for Iraqi refugees are Syria and Jordan, not only because of their geographical proximity, but also because these two countries both at one time practiced a relative open door policy vis-à-vis Iraqis since the beginning of the invasion.

⁵ Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (2010)

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Norwegian Church Aid (2010)



The UNHCR estimates that 1.5 to 1.6 million Iraqis are residing in Syria;⁹ representing 10 percent of Syria's approximately 18 million population. As of the end of May 2010 a total of 165,896 registered Iraqi refugees were considered to be habitually residing in Syria. A UNHCR survey has shown that the overwhelming majority of respondents fled to Syria because of a direct threat to themselves or their families.¹⁰ Whilst the highest number of Iraqi refugees is to be found in Damascus, where their settlement has generated profound changes in entire neighbourhoods such as Sayda Zaynab, Jaramana, Massaken Barzeh, Yarmouk and Qodsiyyeh; refugee communities are spread across all governorates and districts and have influenced the character and realities of other cities like Aleppo, Lattaquieh and Deir el Zor, where accommodation and living costs are lower than the in the capital.¹¹

Some Iraqis have been granted temporary visas to enter Syria; however visa restrictions were stringently tightened in 2007. This has resulted in many refugees becoming ineligible for legal residency in the country.¹² By crossing the Syrian borders, Iraqis' passports are stamped banning them from working. Such restrictions have inevitably led to a situation in which girls and women are more susceptible to becoming the targets for trafficking into sexual exploitation.¹³

On the basis of the fieldwork conducted by organisations inside Iraq, and the data available thus far; it is deemed that the sex work of Iraqi refugees could be divided into three levels, namely: prostitution on the

⁹ European Commission (2008)

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2010)

¹¹ Dorai, K., (2010)

¹² Between the beginning of the Iraqi war in 2003 and early 2007, all Iraqis were able to obtain an entry visa at the border and were allowed to stay three months in Syria and to renew their stay several times by exiting and re-entering the country. During the first half of 2007, Syria tightened its visa policy by requesting the presentation of the G new series Iraqi passport, by reducing to one month the duration of the granted visit visa at the border as well as the introduction of a restricted visa granted only to fifteen different categories of Iraqis and delivered upon presentation of relevant documentation.

¹³ Amnesty International (2007)



individual level, on a family level and on the level of organized networks.¹⁴

The first level refers to a girl or woman who has made the decision to engage in prostitution and without the knowledge of her family. In reality, this decision is often one arrived at as a consequence of being forced by poverty and circumstance. Whilst the well-being and safety of these girls is absolutely important, SCEME's research and campaigning focuses on the subsequent, and often interconnected, two levels which relate to the forced sexual servitude of girls and women; the levels of family and organized networks.

The second level refers to those forced in work with the knowledge and active involvement of family members; these family members are most often male.¹⁵ This type of prostitution is also called "secret prostitution" and is most frequently reported in the Jaramana area of Damascus.¹⁶

Case Study

Lafif, an Iraqi refugee, was last known to be living with her mother and brothers. Prevented as refugees from working legally in the country, her family had run out of its savings. By the age of 14, her mother had forced her to work in a nightclub as a prostitute in order to generate income for the family.¹⁷

Complexly interwoven with trafficking and forced prostitution we also report that Iraqi girls are increasingly finding themselves in mut'a marriages. As the Karama Movement in the Arab Region has uncovered,¹⁸ on Fridays young girls are married off at price and on the following Sunday the couple is divorced.¹⁹ Research

¹⁴ Gimon, M., (2007)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sinjab, L. (2007)

¹⁸ The Karama Movement is initiative, headquartered in Cairo and launched in 2005, fueled by a coalition of partners as constituencies to build a movement to end violence against women in the Middle East and North Africa

¹⁹ Karama Movement in the Arab Region (2008)



suggests that rates at which these mut'a marriages are carried out intensifies in the summer when male tourists visit Syria from the Gulf. Some of these tourists arrive looking to pay dowries to the families or pimps of these girls in exchange for brief marriages for the purposes of sexual exploitation for the duration of their visit.²⁰ These so called 'summer-marriages' in which the girls and their husbands live together temporarily of course also provide none of the legal rights associated with marriage, such as alimony and inheritance, making vulnerable both the women involved and their resulting children.²¹ Although this particular kind of marriage is not explicitly called prostitution, it is in effect sexual exploitation, often forced, as means of either securing livelihood, or generating profit.

The third level involves organized networks and criminal gangs which offer women and young girls for sale to people in the local community, tourists, as well as night clubs and casinos.²² Traffickers played an important role in opening such nightclubs in collaboration with brokers in Syria, relying on the selling of the bodies of female Iraqis. Clubs such as *Al Nigma* and *Al Manara* in the suburbs of Damascus are frequented both by local Syrians and tourists from the Gulf and beyond.²³

Some impoverished Iraqi families have abandoned their girls at the nation's borders whereby Syrian and Jordanian traffickers either arrange forged documents for them or force the girls into a 'legal' marriage, to be immediately divorced upon arrival at their destination. The latter route into the country is facilitated by a culture within Iraqi society of not raising questions about a girl's status and whereabouts are not raised when she is married. After the sale of these young girls into the sex market; traffickers, who are often female themselves, then transport these girls, who can be as young as 11 and 12, and force them into sexual

²⁰ Muhanna, N., (2011)

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Karama Movement in the Arab Region (2008)



servitude in a nightclub or brothel.²⁴ The youngest girls are favored by the traffickers', who consider girls to have become too old upon reaching the age of 20. For virgin girls, the sale price can reach thousands of dollars and in some devastating cases, girls are obliged by their traffickers to undertake painful and dangerous hymen operations in order that they might be re-sold again as virgins.²⁵

Case Study

Nada, 16, was left by her father at the Syrian border. She was trafficked to Damascus, whereupon she was raped by five men and sold to a woman who forced her to work as a prostitute in nightclubs. At the last knowledge of her whereabouts, she was being held in a protection centre waiting for repatriation.²⁶

Jordan

The preliminary research conducted by SCEME has yielded information related to the trafficking of Iraqi refugees further afield than Syria; into Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and the Gulf States. Whilst the research cannot, at this point, investigate deeply into the situation of these girls and young women due to the enormity of the situation, and distinct lack of data, it is most important to note that this is a problem affecting the entire region which must be investigated. SCEME has launched a fact-sheet to draw attention to the wider plight of these girls and the steps which are made, or which must be made, to protect them. In the case of Jordan, for instance, current estimates indicate that up to 750,000 Iraqis have fled the consequences of the Iraq war to seek refuge in Jordan, a country of approximately 6 million people. Many of these refugees are single women and their children whose husbands have either been killed in conflict and violence, or who have chosen to remain behind in Iraq. Despite the great danger faced by Iraqis within their own borders, they are not

²⁴ United States Department of State (2010)

²⁵ Gimon, M., (2007)

²⁶ Sinjab, L., (2007)



recognised as refugees by the Jordanian government and therefore most are living in the country illegally, living under the threat of deportation at any time.²⁷

With the impacts of violence in Iraq, Jordan has become also a destination for men, women and children who have been subjected to trafficking in persons; most typically this trafficking occurs under the conditions of forced labour, but also, as in the case of some women and girls, forced prostitution.²⁸

Case Study

Suha, 17 was sold to an Iraqi gang by her mother after her father was killed. When she reached Jordan, she was raped by a gang of 4 men who were profiting through catering to high profile clients in both Jordan and Syria. Upon being saved by an Iraqi family and helped by them to get a new passport, she managed to escape and return to Iraq.²⁹

What is Being Done?

In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its two supplementary Protocols.³⁰ In Palermo, Italy, 80 countries became signatories to the Supplementary Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, this is also known as the TIP Protocol,³¹ and which entered into force on 25th December 2003. Whilst Syria signed the TIP Protocol on 13th December 2000, Jordan and Iraq did not.³²

²⁷ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2007)

²⁸ United States Department of State (2010)

²⁹ Sarhan, A. (2007)

³⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2004)

³¹ Ekberg, G. S. (2002)

³² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2008)



In the same year, the United States enacted the Victims of Trafficking Protection Act and has subsequently analysed the state of trafficking internationally, publishing its findings in the annual Trafficking in Persons report (TIP Report). The TIP Report ranks governments according to what it terms as a “3P Paradigm” on their efforts to prosecute human trafficking violators, protect the victims and prevent further human trafficking violations³³. A Tier 1 rating indicates that a government is in full compliance with the provisions of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and the Palermo Protocol. A Tier 2 rating indicates less compliance, but an appreciable effort of the government in enforcement and prevention. A Tier 2 rating made with reservations is labeled a Watch List ranking; this indicates a growing number of trafficked persons and government failure to provide evidence of increased persecution within the ranked country. A Tier 3 rating indicates minimal effort to combat human trafficking.³⁴

In 2010, no state in the MENA region achieved a Tier 1 ranking. Syria achieved a Tier 2 Watching List ranking, an improvement upon its Tier 3 ranking place the previous year.³⁵ Jordan also remains in the Tier 2 ranking list.³⁶ That means that both governments do not currently fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but have made some attempts to do so.

Actions in Syria

Bashar Al-Assad, President of Syria, issued a legislative decree in January 2010, detailing criminal penalties for individuals found guilty of committing the trafficking of persons. The sanctions imposed on girls who practice prostitution by force were merely decreased, despite some recognition that they are the victims and not the

³³ United States Department of State (2010) – *Please see supplementary note. Since the April Conference, the U.S. Department of State has released the TIP Report, 2011. The supplementary note provides comments on the status of these countries in 2011.*

³⁴ United States Department of State (2010)

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ United States Department of State (2010)



perpetrators; however the sanctions imposed on men involved in trafficking were toughened.³⁷ In addition, the founding of a new shelter for trafficked women in Aleppo along with the drafting of a plan to increase prevention efforts nationwide has also contributed to Syria's improved ranking in the 2010 TIP report.³⁸ However, Syria remains far from fulfilling the expectations of the Palermo Protocol, which it signed and ratified in 2000, because it shows little evidence of much needed increased investigation of human trafficking activity or training to law enforcement officials to assist them to identify violations.³⁹

Although Syria has increased its partnerships with local NGOs in order to help identify victimised women and protect them in shelters in the capital and Aleppo, the government has failed to recommend women to shelters, typically committing them thus to detention centres with the view to returning repatriating them without any legal alternative. When the UNHCR tracks these detainees, it often finds that they have been released on bail. Moreover, neither the Ministry of Social affairs nor Syria's juvenile detention centres are equipped to address this growing problem, nor do they have the tools necessary to provide effective and just rehabilitation or reintegration programmes for those who have been the victims of forced prostitution, nor mechanisms to provide support victims of trauma and exploitation, since their role is simply focused upon holding young women until they are released or repatriated by court order. The Syrian authorities repatriate a large number of Iraqi refugees every day on the grounds that they have broken the law. A policy that makes unlawful to work and then leads to the deportation of those who have broken the law, puts Iraqi refugee women and especially those who have been forced into the sex trade at increased risk of repatriation and of losing their right of non-refoulement.

³⁷ United States Department of State (2010)

³⁸ United Nations in Syria, 'Shelter for Victims of Trafficking Opens in Syria'

³⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2010)



Actions in Jordan

Although Jordan has not ratified the TIP Protocol, it has enacted a national anti-trafficking action plan; drafted guidelines for opening a long-term shelter for victims of trafficking and designed a public awareness strategy. However, the provision of essential victim assistance, punishment of traffickers and strong cooperation with the embassies of source countries, such as Iraq, remains limited,⁴⁰ and it is imperative that Jordan increases its efforts and undertakes all appropriate measures in order to combat sex trafficking in its territories.

The availability of adequate shelters for victims; determined efforts to identify and support victims of forced prostitution and, crucially, confirmation that these victims are not determined to have committed, and therefore punished, for unlawful acts; along with the increase on bilateral partnerships within the MENA region constitute only the first step towards the improvement of the situation of Iraqi women and girls in Jordan. In addition, it is vital that refugee and trafficked women and girls have access to quality psychological support and services to assist them following the trauma and abuse that many have suffered. There also remains the need for greater targeted recognition of, and response to, the particular issue of sex trafficking in Jordan since whilst Jordan has a strategy in place to address trafficking it, as in the Arab region more widely, focuses on trafficking in the context of labour rights and duties and the great challenge of sex challenge is under-addressed.

What Has to be Done Now? - SCEME's Goals

Information, data and research related to the sex trafficking of Iraqi women – indeed, trafficking of women and girls in the Middle East as a whole – is sparse. It is absolutely imperative that more research is undertaken so that the international community can begin to address these violations. In this regard, we are to be working

⁴⁰ United States Department of State (2010)



with partners in Syria, Jordan and Iraq in order to collect qualitative and quantitative data on sexual and gender-based violence against women. We believe that a stronger understanding of the realities facing Iraqi women and girls is the only way to support civil society and government authorities to formulate appropriate responses and programmes to address this violation of the most fundamental of human rights, through the development of strong and effective strategies of deterrence, prevention and prosecution through programmes addressing, amongst others, public awareness, advocacy and the proper support and rehabilitation of victims.⁴¹ SCEME aims to raise the voice of these women to clarify that:

- Trafficked and prostituted women and girls are victims of poverty, conflict and violence. They are not criminals and do not constitute a threat to society, and rather than being punished as offenders by unjust judicial systems, must be protected.
- Local, National and International action must be undertaken to address the causal relationship between poverty, lack of education, lack of employment and the prevalence of sex trafficking of Iraqi women.
- Social attitudes and legal norms diverge greatly in the MENA area, as does the pace of change and development. Education and raising awareness around human rights violations and human trafficking in rural areas, schools and amongst family leaders is a starting point in changing perceptions and taking action towards such violations. The MENA region has been going through major changes in the last couple of months, it is our role and your role to stop these violations and make sure that trafficked women voices are heard, and that their abusers are prosecuted.
- NGOs like SCEME, like our partners and friends, and like all those dedicated organisations in Iraq, in the Middle East and internationally – many of whom have been working alone and in adverse and dangerous

⁴¹ *Ibid.*



conditions to report on and protect Iraqi women and girls from trafficking – cannot end sex trafficking in the Middle East alone. It is imperative that the judiciary and legislative bodies, the military, police forces and profit making corporations across the region make the fundamental changes necessary to secure the rights of women and girls.



Supplementary Note, 29th June 2011

This conference paper was originally delivered at the Women Solidarity for an Independent and Unified Iraq Conference which took place in London, UK on 9th April 2011. Since this time, the United States Department of State released its Trafficking in Persons report 2011. This section outlines the developments, as decided by Department of State, with regards to Jordan and Syria.

In June 2011, Syria remained a Tier 2 Watch List ranking; again demonstrating that it does not yet meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. The report states, that Syria did not ‘demonstrate evidence of increasing efforts to investigate and punish trafficking offenses, inform the public about the practice of human trafficking, or provide much needed anti-trafficking training to law enforcement and social welfare officials’.⁴² Inadequate training for law enforcement officials remains an area of key concern in the prevention of the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation. Some ‘modest’ progress was made in the areas of the protection of victims and the prevention of trafficking; however the male-dominated police units have continued to be insensitive to issues of sexual violence, which prevents many victims from reporting their abuse and the wider Syrian public remains unaware of the realities of trafficking within the state, it being a subject too taboo to be discussed.⁴³

In June 2011, Jordan once again was placed with a Tier 2 ranking. The Report finds that while Jordan the government demonstrated some progress in specific areas, notably enforcing regulations related to factor and domestic workers, it demonstrated an ‘overall decreased commitment to combat human trafficking, as once effective structures became moribund’.⁴⁴ It finds that its capacity to implement the 2010 National Anti-

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ United States Department of State (2011)



Trafficking Plan was hampered by factors including government reshuffles and limited ministerial capacities. Over the period

2010/2011, the Government of Jordan did increase efforts to prosecute and punish trafficking offenders and consequently investigated several legal cases involving forced labor and forced prostitution; however its actions to protect victims and prevent trafficking decreased.

The poor attainment and lack of improvement in Syria and Jordan reflects a trend across the entire MENA region. Rather than demonstrate notable improvements, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Sudan and Yemen all found themselves failing to meet the minimum criteria, and scoring even lower than in the previous year.

Please join the Karamatuna campaign and help us fight against sex trafficking in the Middle East

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