

The Impact of Wars and Conflicts on Mental Health of Arab Population

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Abstract

Background. Studies of the general population reveal a definite increase in the incidence and prevalence of mental disorders among people who have experienced war and conflict.

Objective. The aim of this paper is to review research findings about the impact of war and conflict on mental health among the general population of Arab countries.

Method. The review is comprehensive rather than systematic and is limited to literature available on PubMed online databases. The search strategy aims to locate different study designs with specific inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Result. In general, studies in the literature confirm the impact of war and conflict in Arab countries on the mental health of the general population. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Major Depression Disorders were the most common psychological complications reported.

Conclusion. Arab populations exposed to war and conflict need to have agencies with a rich supply of professionals, funding and equipment to provide basic needs, social supports good screening, and rehabilitation programmes.

Keywords: War, Conflict, Mental health, Arab countries

1. Introduction

Mental health is created by our interactions with people and events in the world around us. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO, 2001).

One of the most traumatic events that may face individuals in their life is the war and conflict. These represent dangerous crises and disasters encountered by nations and people in general, and include extreme aggressive events in the form of violence, economic failure, social disturbance, and high mortality rates (Samia & Shaheen, 2013).

The people located in an area exposed to war and conflict suffers from the bad consequences in their health, economy and social diminution. Among the complications of war and conflict, impacts on the mental health of the general population are the most significance. Studies demonstrate a definite increase in the incidence and prevalence of mental defects among people who expose to war and conflict (Srinivasa & Rashmi, 2006). The psychological complications are well reported and are commonly persistent. Among the main manifestations are depression, anxiety, irritability, emotional instability, social instability, cognitive disturbance, and behavioural disturbance (Srinivasa & Rashmi, 2006).

The importance that the WHO attributes to dealing with the psychological traumas of war was demonstrated by the resolution of the World Health Assembly in May 2005, which urged member states “to strengthen action to protect children from and in armed conflict” and the resolution of the WHO Executive Board in January 2005, which urged “support for implementation of programmes to repair the psychological damage of war, conflict and natural disasters” (WHO, 2005).

In addition, the WHO estimated that, in situations of war and armed conflict throughout the world, “10% of the people who experience traumatic events will have serious mental health problems and another 10% will develop behavior that will hinder their ability to function effectively. The most common conditions are depression, anxiety and psychosomatic problems such as insomnia, or back and stomach aches” (WHO, 2001).

2. Significance and Purpose of the Paper

During recent decades, a number of Arab countries have been subjected to frequent episodes of war and conflict, resulting in different psychological consequences among the general population. Several studies have investigated this impact. The aim of this paper is to review the research findings about the impact of war and conflict on the mental health of the general population in Arab countries.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria are studies available on PubMed database, involving the impact of major wars and conflicts on the mental health of the general population, and wars that occurred in Arab countries during the period 1975 to 2005. All other criteria are excluded.

4. Literature Review

Arab countries have suffered from numerous traumatic wars and conflicts, which have had an impact on the mental health of their general population, and many studies have investigated the bad psychological consequences. Among these Arab countries are Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine.

4.1 Iraq

Iraq is perhaps the Arab country that has been most subjected to war at different times in its history: a series of coups in the 1960s, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the anti-Kurdish Al-Anfal campaign within the country (1986-1989), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait leading to the Gulf War (1991), and the conflict beginning in 2003. The impact of these wars on the mental health of the Iraqi people has been studied extensively.

A study was conducted on 45 Kurdish families after five years of finishing the military operation in Iraqi Kurdistan. The sample was randomly selected from the survivors in two displacement camps. This study revealed that PTSD was present in 60% of their caregivers and 87% of children (Ahmad, et al., 2000). Based on the study, childhood PTSD was only significantly predicted by the duration of imprisonment and the child trauma score. However, the small sample size used in this study makes the outcomes hypotheses rather than conclusive.

Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg (1998) conducted a study on 84 Iraqi male refugees in which adverse events and the level of social support were ascertained, and psychological morbidity was determined by various measures. The study demonstrated that social factors in exile proved important in determining the severity of both PTSD and depressive reactions among refugees, especially when accompanied with a severe level of trauma. Therefore, insufficient social support was more significant predictor of depressive morbidity than trauma factors.

Furthermore, Stimpson et al. (2003) reviewed all studies comparing the presence of psychiatric disorder in Gulf War veterans and in a comparison group not shared in the Gulf War, and concluded that veterans of the Gulf War revealed an increased prevalence of psychiatric disorder compared with a comparison group not involved in the war. These results are directly related to the increase in psychologically traumatic situations in wartime.

4. 2 Lebanon

Lebanon is another country which has suffered from civil war (1975-1990), and from Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982. The impact of these wars on mental health has been studied widely.

Karam et al. (1998) examined a random sample of 658 Lebanese people aged between 18 and 65, selected from different Lebanese areas, in order to study the impact of war and traumatic events and pre-war depression on the prevalence of major depression during war. The members of the sample were interviewed through the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (Arabic version) and the individual levels of exposure to war events were assessed using a War Events Questionnaire. This study reported that the prevalence of major depression disorder different across these regions from 16.3% to 41.9%. The result of this study indicated that exposure to war and a prior history of major depression were the main predictors for current depression disorder.

Another study was conducted on a sample of 152 women living in Beirut, Lebanon, to investigate the association between mother's distress and the child's mental health (Bryce, et al. 1989). It was found that the level of perceived negative impact of war-related events was positively associated with increased levels of depressive symptomatology among Lebanese mothers, and this was concluded to be the best predictor of their children's reported morbidity.

Macksoud and Aber (1996) conducted a study on a sample of 224 Lebanese children aged between 10 and 16 years to study the number and types of war trauma children face when growing up during war-time, and the relation of such traumatic events to their psychosocial development. The children in the sample were interviewed through measures of war experience, adaptational outcomes, mental health symptoms, and PTSD. According to the study, the number of traumatic experiences related to war was strongly correlated to PTSD symptoms.

A cross-sectional study (Saab, et al. 2003) was performed on a sample of 118 Lebanese hostages of war. It particularly examined the prevalence of general distress and its correlation to captivity-related factors and selected psychosocial variables. The study found that psychological distress was evident among 42.1% of the sample size compared to 27.8% among the control group. Based on the study, major predictors for distress were the number of years of education and the increase in religiosity and rehabilitation after release.

4. 3 Palestine

Palestine is another country that has experienced traumatic events. Through the last period, several studies have revealed high levels of psychosocial dysfunctions among children and adolescents, women, refugees and prisoners in Palestine.

Khamis (2005) conducted a study on a sample of 1,000 children aged 12 to 16 to assess the prevalence of PTSD. PTSD was diagnosed in 34.1% of the children, most of whom were refugees, males, and working.

Another study was conducted by Elbedour et al. (2007) on 229 Palestinian adolescents living in the Gaza Strip, to evaluate and describe the psychological effects of exposure to war-like circumstances. In this study, 68.9% were found as having developed PTSD, 40.0% reported moderate or severe levels of depression symptomatology, 94.9% were demonstrated severe anxiety levels, and 69.9% demonstrated undesirable coping responses. These findings reflect that a significant proportion of Palestinian adolescents living in the Gaza Strip are having serious psychological distress.

In general, the studies in the literature confirmed that war and conflict in Arab countries have an impact on the mental health of the general population.

5. Discussion

This paper has reviewed research findings about the impact of war and conflict on mental health of the general population in Arab countries. These situations have been particularly prevalent in some Arab countries, and the corresponding prevalence of a wide variety of psychological symptoms and disorders in their population has been widely documented. Among the prevailing bad psychological consequences, PTSD and Major Depression Disorders were the most serious complications reported in the general population. Other psychological manifestations, like anxiety, irritability, emotional instability, social instability, cognitive disturbance, and behavioural disturbance, were also reported.

The review is comprehensive rather than systematic and was required to locate different study designs such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, controlled trials, cohort or case-control analytic studies, cross-sectional surveys, expert opinion including literature/narrative reviews, consensus statements, descriptive studies, and individual case studies.

Moreover, the searching for literature on the required criteria was not straightforward. It was designed to collect information from an online database (PubMed) as accurately and precisely as possible. It was necessary to use combinations of terms including 'war and mental health', 'conflicts and mental health', 'wars in Arab countries', and 'psychological effects of wars in Arab countries'. The combined literature search was rewarded with an abundance of articles. Appropriate articles were then reviewed and, to help narrow the findings, articles were filtered based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria including the date and relevance to the paper's topic.

This literature review identified nine relevant studies, which are summarized in Table 1. None of the publications included randomized clinical trials or formal meta-analysis study. The evidence of impact was, therefore, determined by cross-sectional surveys, expert opinion including literature/narrative reviews, consensus statements, and descriptive studies. Another important limitation in this review is that it did not classify the data according to specific age groups, nor did it include publications before 1975. It also excluded the impacts of wars and conflicts that occurred after 2005, e.g. in Libya, Egypt and Syria, because these have not yet been widely documented in the medical literature and may need more time to be validated and reported.

According to the literature, it was clear that vulnerable groups such as children, women and hostages were more affected than others in the Arab populations. War and conflict lead to insufficient funds, lack of basic needs, destruction of homes and shelter, damage to personal relationships, and some mental disorders. These consequences could play a significant role in developing the psychological symptoms and disorders among the general population.

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that Arab countries that have suffered from war and conflict need to have some centres and agencies with professionals, funding and equipment to provide them with their basic needs, social support, and good screening. Furthermore, it is important to develop rehabilitation programmes with highly educated professions to provide the population with good coping strategies and re-involvement in society. In addition, the media should play an intensive role during and after wartime in developing programmes that help people to adapt and return to their own life.

A number of issues have emerged from the literature on the prevalence and pattern of mental health effects of war and conflict. Further studies about the effect on the mental health status of different groups of the population, such as people with physical disabilities, already mentally ill patients, and people with chronic illness, are recommended.

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Table 1: Studies Reported Impact of war and Conflicts on mental Health of Arab Population

Author/s name and publication date	Study Design	Sample	Main Outcomes (measures)	Results
Ahmad et al. (2000)	Cross sectional randomized survey	45 families were randomly selected among the survivors in two displacement camps	The Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms for Children (PTSS-C) and the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)	Childhood Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was only significantly predicted by child trauma score and the duration of captivity.
Gorst-Unsworth et al (1998)	Cross sectional survey	Eighty-four male Iraqi refugees	Various measures of psychological morbidity	Poor social support is a stronger predictor of depressive morbidity than trauma factors.
Stimpson et al. (2003)	Systematic review	A total of 2296 abstracts and 409 complete articles were reviewed	Data were extracted independently by two members of the research team.	Veterans of the Persian Gulf War reported an increased prevalence of PTSD and common mental disorder compared with other active service personnel not deployed to the Gulf.
Karam et al. (1998)	Cross sectional randomized survey	A total of 658 subjects aged 18-65 years were randomly selected from four Lebanese communities differentially exposed to the Lebanon Wars	The Diagnostic Interview Schedule (Arabic version) & War Events Questionnaire	The prevalence of major depression varied across these communities from 16.3% to 41.9%.
Bryce et al. (1989)	Descriptive study	A sample of 152 women living in Beirut		Negative impact of war was positively associated with higher levels of mother's depressive, and as a best predictor of her child's reported morbidity.
Macksoud 1996)	Cross sectional survey	A sample of 224 Lebanese children (10-16 years old)	By interviews using measures of war exposure, mental health symptoms, adaptational outcomes, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).	The number of traumatic experiences related to war was strongly correlated to PTSD symptoms.
Saab et al. (2003)	A cross-sectional study	118 Lebanese hostages released from Khiam prison, an Israeli detention center in Lebanon	The GHQ-12 and the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire.	Psychological distress was present in 42.1% of the sample compared to 27.8% among the control group.
Khamis et al. (2005)	Cross sectional survey	1,000 children aged 12 to 16 years selected from different school at different regions	By Questionnaires were administered in an interview format	Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was diagnosed in 34.1% of the children, most of whom were refugees, males, and working.
Elbedour et al. (2007)	Descriptive study	229 Palestinian adolescents living in the Gaza	Measures of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and coping.	68.9% were classified as having developed PTSD, 40.0% reported moderate or severe levels of depression, 94.9% were classified as having severe anxiety levels, and 69.9% demonstrated undesirable coping responses.

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