

**War Trauma and the Transformation of Social Ties in Iraq**  
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**الصدمة النفسية الناجمة عن الحرب وتحول الروابط الاجتماعية في العراق**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the long-term transformation of social and family structures in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, with particular attention to the ways in which war-related trauma has reshaped intimate and communal life. Before 2003, Iraqi society, especially in urban centers, was marked by relatively integrated social relations, and inter-sect marriages often reflected a broader sense of national identity that extended beyond sectarian boundaries. The escalation of violence after 2006, however, marked a profound rupture in these patterns. It intensified sectarian polarization, weakened interpersonal trust, and redefined the social boundaries that once connected communities. This paper argues that these changes should not be understood simply as cultural shifts. Rather, they are more accurately read as expressions of collective trauma produced by prolonged exposure to violence, insecurity, and uncertainty. In addition to direct conflict, forced displacement and spatial segregation played a critical role in deepening social fragmentation and reshaping how people formed relationships, interacted with others, and understood belonging. The analysis moves beyond marriage patterns to examine wider transformations within the family itself, including rising divorce rates, growing domestic instability, and persistent psychological strain within households. Together, these developments show how war trauma entered private life, weakened family cohesion, and altered relationships within the home. The study also highlights the intergenerational consequences of these changes. Children emerged as one of the most vulnerable groups, facing disrupted education, economic hardship, and increased involvement in informal survival strategies such as labor and street-based activity. These outcomes suggest that war trauma in Iraq has operated not only at the level of individual suffering, but also as a socially transmitted condition that continues to shape future generations.

**Key Words:** Collective trauma, Social fragmentation, Divorce rates, Child vulnerability, Social cohesion

**Research Question:**

How has war trauma reshaped social, marital, and family structures in Iraq since 2003?

**Theoretical Framework:**

This study draws on the concept of collective trauma to explain how prolonged violence can alter entire social systems. Unlike individual trauma, collective trauma affects communities as a whole, reshaping norms, expectations, and patterns of behavior. In Iraq, repeated exposure to war and insecurity did not only harm individuals psychologically; it also transformed social relations, weakened trust, and redefined the meaning of safety and belonging. The study also employs the idea of identity as a survival strategy. In contexts of chronic

insecurity, people often prioritize protection over social openness. In Iraq, sectarian identity increasingly became a mechanism of safety, influencing decisions related to marriage, family life, and social interaction. Under such conditions, identity was no longer simply a marker of affiliation; it became a practical framework through which individuals navigated risk.

### **Methodology:**

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative analysis with descriptive interpretation of social and family trends. It draws on reports, case evidence, and statistical indicators to trace the relationship between conflict and social transformation in Iraq. The study relies on material from the International Organization for Migration on displacement, UNICEF on child vulnerability, the World Bank on economic conditions, the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights on the gendered and familial impact of violence, and broader scholarly work on war, trauma, and social breakdown. In addition, the study uses process tracing to connect conflict dynamics to long-term social change. Comparative analysis is also employed to situate Iraq alongside other post-conflict societies, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon, in order to clarify what is distinctive about the Iraqi case.

### **Introduction**

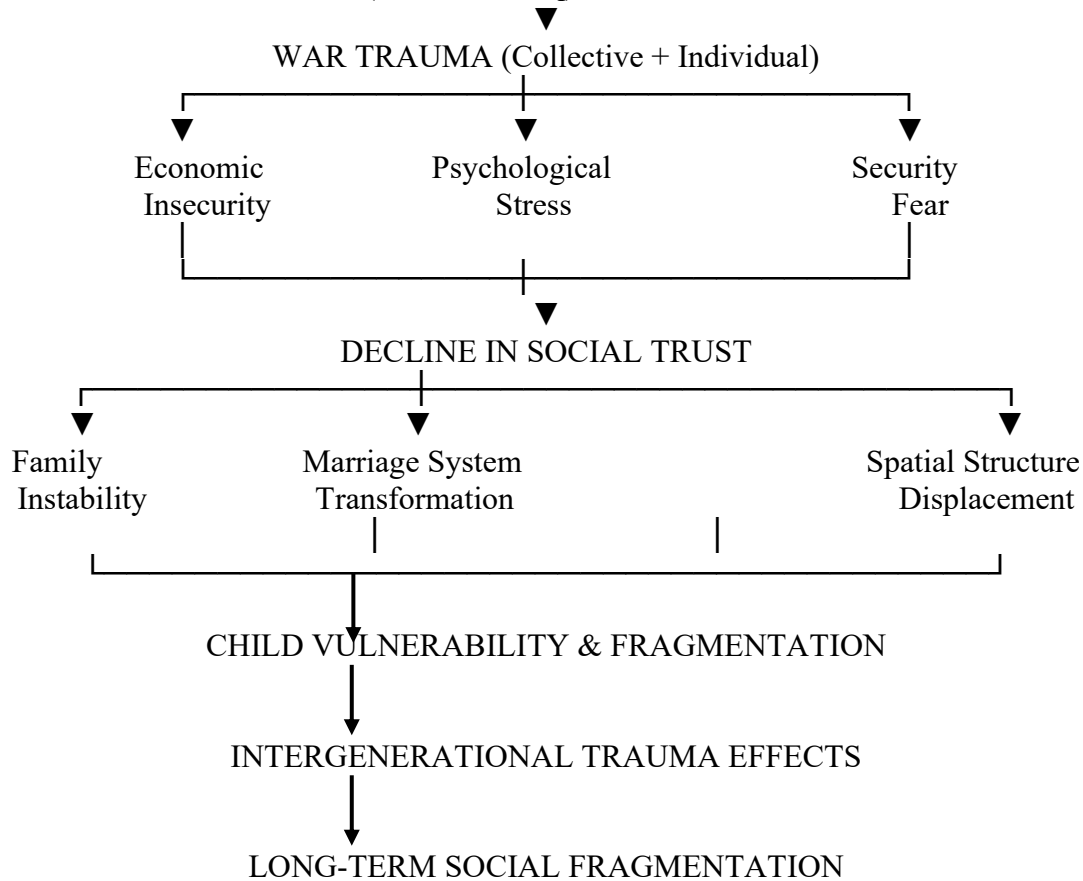
The consequences of war extend far beyond physical destruction. They enter the social fabric of a society, shape collective identity, and alter everyday relationships in ways that may persist long after the violence itself has subsided. In Iraq, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and the intense sectarian violence that followed, especially after 2006, constituted a major rupture in the country's social order. This period did not produce political instability alone; it also transformed intimate and communal life. Trust gave way to fear, and a shared sense of Iraqi identity was increasingly replaced by narrower, identity-based forms of belonging. One of the clearest yet often overlooked indicators of this transformation is the decline in inter-sect marriages between Sunni and Shi'a communities. Before 2003, such marriages were relatively common, particularly in urban areas, and often reflected forms of coexistence that cut across sectarian lines. Some sources even suggest that a significant proportion of marriages in Iraq were inter-sect, especially in Baghdad, where social integration was more visible in daily life (Gelvin 151; "Iraq: Inter-Sect Marriage"). After 2003, and more sharply after 2006, these unions became increasingly vulnerable to sectarian pressures, family interference, and social suspicion (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights; "Iraq: Inter-Sect Marriage"). These shifts were not limited to marriage. Family life more broadly was placed under intense strain by violence, displacement, economic hardship, and chronic uncertainty. Divorce rates increased, domestic tensions deepened, and the home itself was often transformed from a space of protection into a site of stress and instability. Global scholarship on armed conflict shows that war frequently weakens family structures, intensifies household pressure, and reduces child welfare, and Iraq reflects these patterns in particularly visible ways (Bendavid et al.; Hobfoll and de Jong; Taminian). Children have borne a heavy share of this burden. Many have experienced interrupted education, poverty, exposure to labor, and increased vulnerability to exploitation. In this sense, the impact of war does not end with those who directly witness violence. It extends into the next generation through family breakdown, displacement, and emotional instability within the household (UNICEF; World Health Organization). Although much has been written about Iraq's sectarian polarization and political crisis, less attention has been paid to the transformation of intimate institutions such as marriage, family stability, and child welfare. This study addresses that gap by examining how war trauma reshaped social trust, family cohesion, and patterns of belonging after 2003. It argues that the decline in inter-sect marriage, the rise in divorce, and the growing vulnerability of children should be understood not as isolated developments, but as interconnected indicators of a broader process of social fragmentation.

### **Key Findings:**

The findings of this study reveal four major patterns. First, marriage and social trust were reconfigured. War trauma shifted marriage from a relatively open social practice to one increasingly shaped by caution, identity, and perceived security. As trust declined, reliance on family and sectarian networks grew stronger. Second, family fragility increased. Economic pressure, insecurity, and psychological strain contributed to higher divorce rates, weaker marital stability, and greater tension within households. Third, child vulnerability deepened. Children were indirectly affected through disrupted education, poverty, family instability, and growing exposure to labor and street life. Finally, spatial and social fragmentation intensified. Displacement and residential segregation reduced contact between communities, widened social distance, and weakened the possibility of rebuilding everyday trust.

### **Conceptual Module of War Trauma and Social Fragmentation in Iraq:**

CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT (Post-2003 Iraq)



War trauma in Iraq should not be understood as a single and immediate consequence of conflict. Rather, it operates through several mediating pressures, most notably economic insecurity, psychological stress, and fear generated by prolonged instability. These pressures then shape broader structural outcomes, including family instability, changes in marriage patterns, and forced displacement. Together, these outcomes contribute to child vulnerability, intergenerational trauma, and long-term social fragmentation.

**Discussion**

War trauma has profoundly altered social relations in Iraq. Repeated exposure to violence, uncertainty, and insecurity weakened trust between individuals and communities, making social interaction more cautious and increasingly defined by perceived safety. Even those who were not directly exposed to violence often internalized fear through collective memory, public narratives, and the normalization of danger. As a result, behavioral change extended well beyond those immediately affected by conflict. Before 2003, Iraq, despite its political authoritarianism, still maintained forms of everyday coexistence across sectarian lines. Inter-sect marriages between Sunnis and Shi'a were relatively common, especially in Baghdad and other urban centers, and they often reflected a wider Iraqi identity that crossed communal boundaries. James Gelvin notes that intermarriage in Iraq had been encouraged in part as a way of building a more inclusive national identity, while later reporting also indicates that such marriages were widely present in urban society before the post-2003 rupture (Gelvin 151; "Iraq: Inter-Sect Marriage"; *Iraq: Reconstruction and Future Role*). After the bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in 2006, sectarian violence intensified dramatically. In that environment, inter-sect marriages became more socially sensitive and, in some cases, actively dangerous. They were increasingly viewed through the lens of political tension and communal risk. The Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights documented cases in which Sunni-Shi'a couples were pressured to divorce, women in mixed marriages faced abuse from in-laws, and children were separated from mothers because of sectarian difference (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights). These examples show that war trauma entered family life not only through direct violence, but also through the social pressures produced by fear and mistrust. Marriage patterns therefore reveal a wider transformation in identity and trust within Iraqi society. Decisions about marriage were no longer shaped primarily by personal preference or family compatibility. Instead, they became increasingly influenced by insecurity, social pressure, and sectarian affiliation. In some cases, early marriage also rose as families sought protection for daughters, economic relief, or social stability within the perceived safety of the sectarian group (UNICEF). In this sense, sectarian identity became not only a marker of belonging but also a strategy of survival.

Family instability also intensified under the pressure of war. Economic hardship, displacement, and psychological stress placed households under severe strain, contributing to higher divorce rates, weaker family cohesion, and more frequent domestic conflict. These pressures did not affect all families equally. Women in inter-sect marriages, in particular, were exposed to disproportionate risks, including domestic violence and child custody loss, which in turn discouraged similar marriages and reinforced social closure (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights; World Bank). Even when families were not directly targeted by violence, war trauma reshaped domestic life in indirect but powerful ways. Chronic anxiety, depression, grief, and emotional exhaustion often influenced marital relationships and parenting behavior. In many cases, the home itself ceased to function as a place of security and became instead a space marked by tension, instability, and unresolved fear. This is one of the clearest signs that war trauma in Iraq was not merely episodic; it became embedded in everyday life. Children have been among the most deeply affected groups in post-war Iraq. Many faced interrupted schooling, economic deprivation, growing exposure to labor, and increased vulnerability to exploitation. In this context, trauma is often transmitted indirectly. Children may not witness violence firsthand, yet they still live with its consequences through family breakdown, displacement, poverty, and emotional instability within the household (UNICEF; World Health Organization). This helps explain why the effects of war in Iraq have extended across generations rather than remaining confined to those who directly experienced the violence. Forced displacement has also played a central role in reshaping Iraqi society. Large numbers of families were compelled to leave mixed or unstable areas and relocate to places perceived as safer. While such movement could offer immediate protection, it also weakened older community ties, reduced social diversity in everyday life, and reinforced sectarian segregation. Over time, this spatial separation deepened fragmentation and reduced opportunities for meaningful contact between groups (International Organization for Migration).

Indicator	Pre-2003	Post-2006
Inter-sect marriages	Relatively common	Declined significantly
Divorce rates	Moderate	Increasing
Early marriage	Lower	Increased
Child vulnerability	Limited	Expanded( labour, street exposure)
Displacement	Low	Millions displaced

Taken together, these patterns point to a broader structural shift toward social closure, identity based behavior, and family instability. They suggest that war trauma in Iraq cannot be understood only as an individual psychological condition. Rather, it operates as a structural force that reshapes institutions, relationships, and the social environment itself.

#### **Comparative Analysis: Iraq, Bosnia and Lebanon**

A comparison between Iraq and Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals important differences in post-conflict recovery. Both societies experienced identity based violence that fractured communities and transformed social relations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, the aftermath of the 1992-1995 war was shaped by sustained international intervention through the Dayton framework. Although that system did not eliminate division, it did create institutional arrangements aimed at stability, coexistence, and gradual reintegration. International oversight and reconstruction efforts helped support the rebuilding of mixed communities and some degree of institutional cooperation (Bieber; Chandler). Iraq followed a very different trajectory. Although it experienced major external intervention after 2003, that intervention did not produce a coherent long-term strategy for social reintegration. Instead, state fragility, institutional breakdown, and escalating sectarian violence deepened fragmentation rather than reducing it. Unlike Bosnia, where postwar governance at least attempted to manage division within a shared framework, Iraq saw sectarian identity become more deeply consolidated at both political and social levels. Displacement produced increasingly homogeneous neighborhoods, reducing daily interaction between communities and embedding fragmentation in ordinary life. A comparison with Lebanon further highlights the distinctiveness of the Iraqi case. Lebanon, like Iraq, is marked by sectarian politics and a history of civil conflict. Yet despite recurring political crises, Lebanese society has retained a degree of everyday coexistence across sectarian lines. This relative continuity is partly linked to Lebanon's long-standing power-sharing system, which institutionalized sectarian representation while still allowing regular social interaction between communities (Salamey). In Iraq, by contrast, the scale and intensity of post-2003 violence made sectarian identity not merely a political framework but a central determinant of safety and survival. As a result, intimate social practices, including marriage and family formation, were affected much more deeply. These

comparisons show that identity-based conflict alone does not fully explain Iraq's level of fragmentation. Rather, the depth of fragmentation in Iraq is closely connected to the intensity and duration of violence, the scale of displacement, and the absence of effective long-term reintegration policies.

#### Recommendations:

Any meaningful response to Iraq's long-term social fragmentation must begin at the community level. Local initiatives that encourage interaction between different social groups, especially in mixed urban areas, are essential for rebuilding trust. This process is unlikely to succeed if framed only through formal politics; it must also be rooted in everyday forms of coexistence and local reconciliation. At the family level, support services should be strengthened. Basic psychological counseling in primary healthcare centers, legal aid for women and vulnerable families, and community-based mediation in family disputes could help reduce the pressures that prolong trauma inside the home. Child protection must also remain a central priority. Keeping children in school, reducing child labor, and expanding targeted social assistance are all necessary if Iraq is to prevent the further transmission of trauma across generations (UNICEF). Economic stabilization is equally important. Because financial pressure is one of the strongest drivers of family instability, policies that expand household support and create employment in conflict-affected regions are likely to have social as well as economic benefits (World Bank). In this sense, reconstruction should not be limited to infrastructure or state institutions alone. It must also address the damaged social foundations of everyday life.

#### Conclusion

This study has shown that war trauma in Iraq operates as a structural and multidimensional force that reaches far beyond the immediate experience of violence. Trauma is not confined to individual psychological suffering; it has transformed the foundations of social life by altering trust, identity formation, and family dynamics.

The findings demonstrate that post-2003 violence contributed to a broad reorganization of Iraqi society. Marriage patterns shifted from relatively open and socially integrative forms toward arrangements increasingly shaped by insecurity and identity-based concerns. Inter-sect marriages declined under the combined pressures of fear, displacement, and social pressure. At the same time, family instability increased as economic hardship, psychological strain, and insecurity weakened household cohesion. Children emerged as one of the most vulnerable groups, experiencing indirect and intergenerational trauma through poverty, interrupted education, labor, and family breakdown. Forced displacement further deepened these dynamics by reorganizing Iraqi society into more homogeneous spaces and reducing opportunities for rebuilding trust across communities. Ultimately, the Iraqi case demonstrates that war trauma is not a temporary aftereffect of conflict. It is a long-term structural process that becomes embedded in everyday life and reproduces social divisions across generations.

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