

# The Impact of the War on Iraq's Youth

## A Ground Truth Interview with Cpt. Jon Powers

In mid-October, Iraq war veteran **Cpt. Jonathan Powers** visited EPIC's office near Capitol Hill. During his time in Iraq, Jon led reconstruction efforts in his sector, and through this work he became well-acquainted with Iraqi youth. Rather than putting the war behind him, he has continued to fight for the people of Iraq as a civilian. For an hour, we talked about the challenges that Iraq's youth are facing in post-invasion Iraq.

**epic:** During your time in Iraq, where were you stationed and what types of tasks did you initially undertake?

**Jon:** From May 2003 to the end of April 2004 we were stationed in Baghdad. My platoon patrolled the northeast parts of the city -- Adhamiyah, Rubiya, and Al Tunis. We provided security, collected information, conducted checkpoints, raided weapon caches, implemented reconstruction projects, and interacted with the Iraqi people in a variety of ways. At the time, initial expectations were high among the Iraqis and the U.S. military. Unfortunately when we entered Baghdad, we lacked an understanding of Iraq's society, culture, language, and previous rule of law—an oversight that made it difficult to be productive, efficient, and effective in Iraq.

As platoon leader, I was given about a 50,000 person sector, and in that sector I was responsible for local reconstruction efforts, the propane rationing system, three or four schools, two or more mosques, and various marketplaces. Unfortunately, we had to get these places up and running with almost no guidance from the Constitutional Provisional Authority (CPA) and we encountered a variety of obstacles.

**epic:** What was one of your most challenging tasks?

**Jon:** One of our greatest challenges was controlling a propane station in our sector. There are only a few throughout the city, but heavy propane use is part of daily life in Iraq as the people depend on it for heating and cooking. On average, more than two thousand people would show up everyday at this propane shop that received only 438 cans a day. Because of the obvious shortage people rioted, and there was no order or functioning distribution system to speak of. Many people brought the old rationing cards used under Saddam, but we

couldn't read them so we didn't know how to use them to distribute the cans. Our immediate task was clear: We had to create a rationing system. We created a rule: "One person, One can, One line." We had it painted in Arabic and put it on the roof of the propane station. When people came to the station, the rule was clear, and it became our rationing system.

Through our work at the station, the owner and I became really good friends. He started to have me and other members of my platoon over for dinner once per week, and we began establishing good relationships. We really felt like we were doing some productive work.

**epic:** How did the Iraqi children receive you?

**Jon:** Fantastically; they were happy to see anybody. We were dressed in Desert Camouflage Uniforms (DCUs), armored vests, Kevlar helmets, dramatic shrapnel-stopping sunglasses, and we carried M-16 or M-4 Assault Rifles. We thought we looked intimidating, but to the kids we looked more like characters out of a science fiction book. The soldiers were the first to engage Iraq's youth, and so many Iraqi children were introduced to a new culture by someone carrying a weapon.

When I worked as the Battalion Adjutant on the Commander's staff, I orchestrated efforts to support orphanages in our sector. Soldiers requested that family members regularly send toys, clothing, and school supplies. Our visits to the orphanages were often the highlight of the soldiers' week as it became customary to drop gear and pass out candy, provide maintenance support to orphanage generators, or just play with the



Jonathan Powers is a former U.S. Army captain who spent 14 months patrolling Baghdad with the U.S. Army 1st Armored Division from 2003-2004. After returning to the U.S. Jon developed War Kids Relief. This program offers assistance to Iraqi youth by funding orphanages and developing youth centers and community programs to help keep kids off the streets and out of militias.

deprived children.

The orphanage visits were always a break from the harsh reality. Even during one of the worst weeks, when the unit lost two soldiers on December 22nd and the Brigade lost its Command Sergeant Major on Christmas Eve, the Battalion still pushed for the Christmas Day visits with the orphans knowing that the experience would lift spirits.

Unfortunately that proved to be our final visit to the orphanages. On the next visit, the nun warned me, “They [the insurgency] said if they see us working with the Americans, they will kill the kids.” I was shocked. How could someone say that? How could you threaten these orphans who have nothing to do with Saddam, nothing to do with the Americans, nothing to do with the insurgency? It made us sick. Other than the days when I lost comrades, that day looms as the darkest of my 14 months in Iraq.

**epic:** How have recent events affected Iraqi children?

**Jon:** The biggest problem is that millions of Iraqi children are out of school and unable to participate in normal activities. Because of this, most children lack the means to become productive members of society. Researchers estimate that out of 26 million people, 61% are under the age of 24, 50% are under 18, and 40% are under 14 years old. Another study found that under Saddam Hussein nearly 4% of Iraqi children under five were going hungry, but in 2006 that figure doubled to 8%. In terms of education and opportunity, over 3.4 million young people in Iraq today do not attend school. Recent numbers released by the Iraqi Ministry of Education show that the percentage of children attending school dropped dramatically from 75% in 2005 to 30% in 2006.

To further complicate the situation, a research team that interviewed more than 1,000 Iraqi children countrywide found that much of Iraq’s youth population suffers from serious mental health problems as a result of the violence. The report found an overall increase in the number of children seeking psychological counseling, and it found that 92% of those examined have learning disabilities that can be connected to Iraq’s poor security climate.

**epic:** What do you think is the most immediate threat to Iraqi children?

**Jon:** Iraqi children face a vicious cycle where a lack of education and job training causes them to become disengaged from society and from those advocating peace, making them

vulnerable to the insurgent forces and their efforts to recruit for radical movements. Younger Iraqis are attracted to the glamour and drama of insurgency groups, but once they join they become exploited.

**epic:** Do most of these children join the insurgency willingly?

**Jon:** Not always. For instance, U.S. soldiers found a 14-year old boy in a mosque with a suicide vest strapped on him. The bomb did not detonate, so they captured him and learned that he had been kidnapped the week prior from across the country, drugged to the point that he did not know where he was, and was being used by the insurgents as a suicide bomber. He didn’t even have the trigger, so it was clear that someone else was planning to detonate the bomb for him. That kid wasn’t an extremist trying to get back at the Americans—he was just a victim. He was targeted because he lived on the streets and had no family support.

The increase of children on the streets is a growing problem in Iraq, and the insurgents have begun to take advantage of it. The millions of youth out of school constitute the supply base for the insurgents and the next generation of fighters. Undereducated and unemployed, the youth are excellent targets for the “paid for hire” theme that is exploited by the insurgency.

**epic:** What is the attitude toward orphans in Iraq?

**Jon:** To be honest, orphans aren’t supposed to exist in Muslim culture. Parentless children are supposed to be absorbed by extended families. However, Iraq’s economy is so poor right now that extended families are unable to provide for orphaned kids, so they’re ending up first on the streets and then in the orphanages.

Regardless of what Muslim culture teaches, the reality is that orphans in fact exist, and I think that there is a growing acceptance in Iraq that it’s a problem that needs to be addressed.

Orphans fall into four different categories: orphans in the traditional sense, that is, kids whose parents have been killed and left on their own; economic orphans, whose family can no longer support them; street workers, kids who work in the streets and return to homes and families at night; and homeless kids who live on the streets full-time. In the case of the street workers, there is simply not a whole lot you can do for them because they still belong to a family and they still live in a home. Unless you can convince the family that it’s better to enroll their child in a program like our youth center, then it is sort of a lost cause, which is horrible to say.

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The fourth group, those living on the streets, is the most severe case, and these are the types of children that War Kids is trying to reach. These kids have no home to return to at night, and their income derives from prostitution, drugs, collecting and selling aluminum cans, bread, cigarettes, soda—basically anything to get by. If you want to engage these kids, you need to provide them with an alternative source of income while you're educating them.

**epic:** How does War Kids Relief plan to engage street kids and orphans?

**Jon:** War Kids creates safe havens by utilizing and improving existing orphanages. The goal of the program is to enable the children of Iraq to rebound and recover from the disruptive effects of war and to give them hope for a better future. First, we have the Iraq Youth Center Work-Study Program that will offer training and skills to enable Iraq's youth, both male and female, to become active participants in the post-war social and economic reconstruction of their country. We will also create a family program to get orphans into foster families. Finally we want to build a career and life skills center for the thousands of street kids in Iraq.

Right now, we're working on a youth center project that will implement a work-study program in youth centers throughout Iraq. The kids will spend three months alternating between math, English and computer classes. Every other week, they'll be working on public revitalization projects, including painting, picking up trash and working with carpenters. The hope is that along the way, the children will develop vocational skills. When they complete the program, they'll come out with a degree from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and they will work with the vocational manager to find a job.

About two weeks ago, the Minister of Youth and Sports was visiting the U.S., and we had the opportunity to discuss this program with him. When we originally conceived of the program, we planned to have a War Kids team on the ground running the program with the help of ministry employees. However because the violence has increased, it has become more difficult and expensive to operate in Iraq, so we realized that it would actually be more beneficial if the ministry did all the work itself. This is what we pitched to the minister during our meeting, and he loved the idea. As we went line by line through the budget, he looked at each item and said, "We'll pay for this" or "We'll cover that." This extended our base money, so that instead of providing training for 3 months, the program now extends training to almost 6 months. Although oversight will be difficult, we plan to work with some contacts in the State Department to monitor things so they don't get out of hand. The minister told us that we are the first NGO to approach any ministry to ask them to run a program, so we

were pretty excited about that. We plan to have the first youth center running by the end of Ramadan.

**epic:** How open are the Iraq Government Ministries to proposals from Americans?

**Jon:** It varies. We happen to be involved with a ministry that has very little funding and support but is very open to new ideas for engaging Iraqi youth. The main struggle we're facing right now is finding the best way to get the money into the ministry's hands. Unfortunately, I can't just grant funds to it.

**epic:** How is the project going to be presented to the Iraqis-- As an Iraqi project or as a U.S.-funded Iraq project?

**Jon:** This is a ministry program that we're creating for the youth, and the government of Iraq will take ownership of it; neither War Kids nor the concept of American dollars will be communicated to the public. For security reasons we will never publicize the location of our youth centers, even though down the road we hope to establish a hundred in the country.

**epic:** Who is going to provide security for the youth centers?

**Jon:** The Iraqi police will provide security. One thing I stressed to the minister is that for this to work, employees of the center are going to have to work extremely closely with sheiks and tribal leaders. We have to stress to the community leaders that this is their youth center; we are just bringing a program that will educate kids and give them jobs in the community. If you win over the tribal leaders, the militias won't touch it.

**epic:** What are the implementation phases of the youth center plan, given your goal of establishing one hundred youth center programs throughout Iraq?

**Jon:** I told the Minister of Youth and Sports that if he can get this program to work, then I can raise the money to expand the concept across Iraq. If we can prove that \$50,000 does what it should be doing, then we can turn to the U.S. for further funding. By the end of one month, we hope to train and employ over 28,000 kids. So as we get one going, we want to quickly raise another \$50,000 to get a second one going. Over time, we will spread it throughout the country.

**epic:** What successes has War Kids seen in recent months?

**Jon:** There have been a number of successes, including the recent publication of an article, "Iraqi Youth in the Time of War", in the *School of Advanced International Studies Journal*. We've also brought a tremendous amount of attention to Iraq's youth issue, and we've lobbied high-ranking members of

the Senate Armed Services Committee.

**epic:** Have any U.S. or international NGOs or IGOs expressed interest in supporting War Kids or similar youth-focused programs?

**Jon:** Unfortunately, none of the large organizations – the World Bank, USAID, UN, UNICEF – fund orphanages because they don't think they should exist. War Kids made this discovery last December, and it was really frustrating to find out that these organizations only want to support foster families and long-term solutions when, unfortunately, that is not the reality. It upset me that these people sitting in Washington and New York have no concept of what is really happening on the ground in Iraq. While orphanages themselves may not be the best long-term solution, they are a necessary platform to begin the process of developing youth programs. Believe it or not, of all the billions of dollars the Bush administration has spent on Iraq, zero has been allocated for youth development. How are the children going to learn about democracy and freedom if we don't engage them?

**epic:** From your experience, what role do you see NGOs playing in Iraq? Are there any reasons why NGOs should not cooperate or be associated with the U.S. military?

**Jon:** At this point, I think that NGOs have to keep their distance from the U.S. military because of the negative light in which Iraqis view the American forces. Ideally, it should not be that way, and U.S. forces and NGOs should be able to work side by side. In fact, I think it would have been helpful if, at the beginning of U.S. involvement in Iraq, the U.S. had sent humanitarian organizations into the country alongside the armed forces. Here's a good example: My unit developed a plan to set up a sanitation plant in June 2003 that would cost only \$40 a week to operate in a 50,000 person sector.

The community planned to do a big waste pickup day, and in addition to the funds, we needed only a few trucks. In the end we could not get the money or the trucks that we needed and, lacking alternatives, we couldn't move forward with the project. I think if we had been working with people with backgrounds and experience in nation-building, they could have provided alternative solutions, ideas that a young guy like me had no clue about.

In general, I think the main problem was that the CPA was full of young kids who had no experience with nation-building or related issues. Unfortunately, the fact that the Bush administration had no postwar plan contributed to the military's de facto humanitarian role in Iraq. The military should have been able to provide support to the humanitarian organizations without actually creating and running the programs on its own. It was frustrating, and in retrospect it wasted so much time. Now, the Bush administration is forming Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) throughout Iraq, trying to link NGOs, the military, the State Department and other relevant agencies together. This would have been a great idea three years ago, but what is it going to do now?

**epic:** What role can U.S. NGOs play in the reconstruction effort?

**Jon:** The key to War Kids Relief, and the key to the orphans and street kids project is that it's not Americans who are doing the work; War Kids Relief is Iraqi-driven. I've orchestrated the youth center project to run through the Ministry of Youth and Sports with ministry employees. We're just helping to provide the funding and the vehicle for them to make the projects happen. By operating a new program in youth centers that were originally intended to spread Ba'ath party rhetoric, the people will see that the government is striving to do good—and that is a step in the right direction.

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