

An Iraqi doctor's story

The BBC News website is examining life for soldiers and doctors in Iraq who have faced the trauma of war and are now coping with its aftermath.

We spoke to an Iraqi doctor based in the southern city of Basra about his experiences during the 2003 conflict, the effects of the invasion on the soldiers and civilians he treated, and how he and other medical staff coped.

His name has been changed to "Youssef" to protect his safety.

Youssef still remembers one injured soldier brought to him in the final days of fighting in Basra during the 2003 war.

" If someone had very severe psychological problems as a result of the war... they would be treated as lunatics "

"Youssef", Iraqi doctor

"He came into Basra hospital after an air strike, with the spattered remains of his fellow soldiers who were not so lucky still strewn around him."

His face was like a mask, he said, describing the soldier as "clearly shocked."

The soldier had left his comrades briefly to bring them tea. When he returned, he saw a coalition bomb hit their position.

"He saw his life-long friends being minced into pieces, with arms here, heads there, parts of their bodies everywhere," Youssef said.

"It's beyond the power of any language to describe. How can you deal with that?"

Physical trauma

Youssef, who has worked in Basra for more than 15 years, says a doctor's duty to separate his or her emotions from impartial medical judgement became almost impossible during the constant bombardment and the steady stream of casualties.

But he says that for the demoralised and outgunned Iraqi soldiers who served in the city, which was encircled and rapidly captured by British forces in late March of 2003, it was far worse.

"[After fighting ended] many physically handicapped soldiers didn't get the assistance they needed, let alone the psychologically disabled ones.

"People were too busy worrying about their lives to be concerned for their souls. There was not even a mention of 'psychological' trauma of any sort.

"The extent of physical trauma alone was too much a burden on the country."

Guilt

Youssef says soldiers rarely sought help for psychological traumas suffered during the war because of the huge social stigma attached to mental health issues.

"If someone had very severe psychological problems as a result of the war - flashbacks, nightmares,

nerves - there would be nowhere for them to seek help.

"They would be treated as lunatics."

And for those soldiers who fled their posts in the face of the coalition onslaught, there was another type of mental anguish.

"Some served and now they suffer. And, of course, some didn't serve and are traumatised as a result of the guilt," Youssef says.

'Mutilated' bodies

Doctors and nurses working to treat Iraqis - both civilian and military - who were injured during the conflict faced their own traumas.

"We were under stress, and fear, both for ourselves and for our families," Youssef says.

"Plus we were treating many people whose bodies were mutilated because of the heavy nature of bombardment they and their property were under.

"Everybody was angry with the seemingly indiscriminate pattern of the air strikes on our population and a lot of civilian casualties happened.

"Despite all this, we had to do our job to the best of our abilities."

Interview by Sarah Brown.

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