

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Formerly Political Prisoners in Iraq: A Preliminary Report

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Abstract: ***Background:** Iraqi political prisoners were subjected to regular physical and psychological torture. Both physical and psychological torture methods were associated with increased PTSD symptoms, especially when combined. In Iraq, several articles were published on PTSD, but no study was focused on former political prisoners or torture victims. Therefore, this study was carried out to estimate rate of PTSD among former political prisoners in Iraq. **Methods:** A total of 400 formerly political prisoners participated in this study. Their age was 55.4 ± 12.6 years with male to female ratio 4.6:1. They were recruited from Political Prisoners Establishment. Iraqi Version of Harvard Trauma Questionnaire was used to assess PTSD and exposure to trauma in prison and during widespread violence in Iraq after 2003. **Results:** Out of total, 331 (82.7%) had PTSD. No significant association between PTSD and year of detention was observed. **Conclusion:** High rate of PTSD among formerly political prisoners. Years of detention and years after prison were not predictors of PTSD.*

Keywords: PTSD, political prisoners, torture

1. Introduction

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a syndrome that develops after exposure to extreme stressful events that provoke fear, horror, or helplessness. The syndrome is characterized by re-experiencing the trauma, avoiding reminders of trauma and increase physiological arousal¹.

Political persecution as in imprisonment and torture is a traumatic stress event that has been shown as a cause of PTSD^{2,3}.

Iraqi political prisoners were subjected to regular torture^{4,5}. Both physical and psychological torture methods were associated with increased PTSD symptoms, especially when combined^{2,3,6,7}. Several articles⁸⁻¹² were published on PTSD among Iraqis exposed to wars, civil war and widespread violence¹³⁻¹⁵. However, no studies have focused on former political prisoners or torture victims in Iraq. Therefore, this work was carried out to estimate rate of PTSD among formerly political prisoners in Iraq.

2. Materials and Methods

A total of 400 formerly political prisoners was participated in this study. Their age was 55.4 ± 12.6 years with a male to female ratio of 4.6:1. They were recruited from the Political Prisoners Establishment (PPE), and from the official offices of parties e.g. Communist Iraqi Party, Islamic Dawa party, Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Others formerly political prisoners and recruited only from PPE as they share no party. The detention was at schools, universities and workplaces after minor critical comments.

Iraqi version of Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) was used to assess PTSD and its symptoms in addition to exposure to trauma (physical, sexual and psychological) in

prisons. HTQ was used also to assess exposure to trauma during wars, civil war and widespread violence.

HTQ was used in Iraq^{10,11}. Its validity and reliability were known. PTSD was assessed by adding the scores of 45 questions and divided by the total score of the question. A score of > 2.5 mean was regarded as PTSD.

HTQ is a self-completed questionnaire. It was completed by ex-political prisoners. A member of the team was there to explain any mysterious question.

All participants sign consent after explanation of the aim and nature of the study. Chi square was used to examine the association of PTSD (dependent variable) with year of detention (independent variable). P value < 0.05 was considered as significant.

3. Results

Out of the total participants, 331 (82.7%) had PTSD. Among ex-political prisoners of 1963, 51 (85.0%), of those in 1970s 110 (84.6%), of those in 1980s 100 (83.3%), and those of 1990s 70 (77.8%) had PTSD. No significant association between PTSD with year of detention was noticed ($\chi^2 = 2.1$, 3, $p = 0.5$).

4. Discussion

This study showed that the prevalence of PTSD among political prisoners in Iraq was 82.7%. It is a very high rate; opposed to the prevalence among Iraqi population e.g. Iraqi Mental Health Survey (IMHS)⁸ reported a rate of 2.5% among general population, Jacoub et al⁹ reported a high rate of 64.5% among emergency ambulance personnel, Al-Shawi et al¹⁰ reported a figure of 22.9% among university students, Al-Diwan¹¹ reported a rate of 18.7% among university students and 43% among school children and Yassen and

Salih¹² reported a high rate of 58.6% in Basrah (southern Iraq). The rates among Iraqi population were attributed to the exposure to traumatic events of wars, civil war and widespread violence¹³⁻¹⁵. In addition to exposure to violence in Iraq in the recent decades (wars, civil war and widespread violence)¹³⁻¹⁵, political prisoners were exposed in imprisonment and torture^{4,5}, which in turn contributed to observed figure of PTSD (82.7%). The psychological sequelae of torture have been concentrated in the long term effects (chronic post-traumatic disorder)¹⁶⁻¹⁸. Imprisonment and torture due to political reasons was documented by several workers^{4,5}. The observed higher rate of PTSD (82.7%) among political prisoners than among general population (2.5%)⁸ is similar to that reported among Vietnam war prisoners (18-54%)¹⁹ which is higher than that among general population (1.3%)²⁰.

Detection of high rates of PTSD among former political prisoners after more than period of 25 years (1990s) to half of century of beginning of imprisonment (1963) is consistent with that of other studies on political prisoners in other countries^{3,21,22}. The extreme high figure of PTSD (82.7%) observed in this study might be explained by the further exposure to civil war and widespread violence after 2003¹³⁻¹⁵. Al-Diwan¹¹ reported the effect of cumulative exposure to trauma on developing PTSD.

No significant differences in the prevalence of PTSD among formerly political prisoners between the years of detention was noticed ($p = 0.5$). This finding might be explained by the recent evidences that showed changes in the course of PTSD in form of delayed²³ or fluctuating symptoms over extended decades²⁴. This finding might stressed that the 4 decades of study is one stage. In Germany, historians had argued for distinction between 3 eras which was presenting with different prison conditions: Stalin era (until 1953) with common use of all forms of physical torture, Ulbricht era (until 1971) with physical and increasing psychological torture utilization and Honecker era (until 1989) with primary psychological torture.

5. Conclusion

High rate of PTSD among formerly political prisoners was noticed. Years of detention and period after prison were not predictors of PTSD

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Table 1: Distribution of PTSD among former political prisoners

<i>Year of detention</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>PTSD</i>	
		<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
1963	60	51	85.0
1970s	130	110	84.6
1980s	120	100	83.3
1990s	90	70	77.8
total	400	331	82.7

$\chi^2 = 2.1, 3, p = 0.5$