

Find Baby Jesus in the Rubble

On Sunday, December 17th, 2023 a Nativity scene will be set in front of the Syracuse Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception before the 9:45 AM Mass for people to view and comment on; it suggests that Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus would likely be incinerated if being under Roman occupation, Herod had killer drones. Syracuse has one of a growing number of killer drone bases in the United States.

The churches in the city of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, are canceling the celebration of Christmas because their fellow Palestinians in Gaza are being slaughtered by Israel aided by United States approval and assistance. Many American Christian churches are silent about the ongoing genocide inflicted by Israel and are not promoting the nonviolent message of Jesus. More than 20,000 people have been killed in Gaza; thousands more remain uncounted under the rubble caused by Israeli terror from planes, tanks, howitzer 155mm shells, and other weapons of mass destruction. Since Oct. 7th, 50,897 people have been injured. We deplore US Senator Schumer who has given total cooperation to the Israeli slaughter of Gazans and led the US Senate to refuse to support a permanent ceasefire.

This Christmas, we applaud and join Pope Francis in his renewed call for an immediate permanent humanitarian ceasefire, and we call for an end to the occupation. Palestinians need to be free from the ongoing unequal apartheid system of control and given full autonomy, and respect for their human rights with dignity. We call for an end to the genocide. We pray that Christians will return to the true meaning of Christ's birth, the proclaimed Prince of Peace. Join in our demand to end sending weapons and funding to Israel.

This is a local issue in Syracuse, protested since 2009; as

Hancock Drone Airbase, one of the largest training and maintenance centers for drone assassinations, kills civilians abroad just as Israeli drones are used in Gaza. In attendance are members of Pax Christi Upstate NY, Upstate Drone Action, Ithaca Catholic Workers, Friends of Ben Salmon, Syracuse Peace Council, and many people of conscience who want the slaughter to end.

Ceasefire Now!

Directions to Syracuse Cathedral, 259 E Onondaga St, Syracuse, NY 13202

(<https://www.google.com/maps/search/259+E%C2%A0+Onondaga+St,+Syracuse,+NY+13202?entry=gmail&source=g>)

The Call of the Churches in Bethlehem to Cancel Christmas Celebrations and Find Baby Jesus in the Rubble:
https://youtu.be/22curZplBl0?si=mLIIDunSuDa_QxL0

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/110-freeway-reopens-cease-fire-201246388.html>

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****Featured Image:*** *A Lutheran church in Bethlehem has a Christmas Nativity centered on the war and suffering in Gaza. A Lutheran church in Bethlehem has a Christmas Nativity centered on the war and suffering in Gaza.*

Public Health Professionals Must Demand an End to the Use of Weaponized Drones

by *William Bruno*, published on *Truthout*, January 14, 2022

On January 13, 2017, a family including a husband, wife and three small children scurried from building to building in East Mosul, Iraq. They were seeking refuge as a battle between ISIS (also known as Daesh) and U.S.-backed forces swirled around them. The family was huddled in an abandoned school surrounded by other civilians when a U.S.-operated drone struck and destroyed the structure. The father and one of his sons narrowly escaped with their lives. The tragic fate of his wife and other children would not be confirmed until months later when he watched as their bodies were excavated from the rubble.

This account was just one of several described in a recent publication of Pentagon reports documenting the extensive civilian casualties resulting from U.S. drone and air strikes. As the reporting shows, the considerable toll armed drones reap on civilian populations has largely been obfuscated by the U.S. government. What reporting such as this makes clear, however, is that weaponized drones are becoming a serious threat to public health.

The use of weaponized drones for targeted killings is not new and neither is the government's lack of transparency. The U.S. government has been steadily increasing lethal covert drone operations since 2008, and almost everything we know about the program comes from whistleblowers and leakers. Specifics around the number of civilians killed and the extensiveness of the program are difficult to ascertain, but stories like the one above demonstrate the disregard for human life that

results from the use of weaponized drones.

Like all violations of human rights, the public health community, of which I am a part, has an obligation to condemn the use of weaponized drones and demand an end to these targeted killings. If the goal of the public health sector – which includes health care practitioners, researchers, academics and policy makers – is, as the American Public Health Association's (APHA) website states, "*to prevent people from getting sick or injured*," then surely lending an authoritative voice in opposition to weaponized drones is more than appropriate.

U.S. citizens bear special responsibility. Unlike other causes of death or disability, weaponized drones are built, maintained and funded by our tax dollars. It is our elected officials who put them in action. Our complicity is unacceptable.

The APHA has made impassioned arguments advocating for the prevention of armed conflict from a public health perspective. However, little has been written specifically with regard to drones. This omission is important when one considers how our political leaders – even those often seen as advocates for "*peace*" – view the use of weaponized drones. For example, the Nobel-Peace-Prize-winning former President Barak Obama saw drone strikes as an alternative to the more uncouth, "*stupid wars*" that he railed against during his campaign. This perspective resulted in a huge expansion of the program under his administration with well over 500 strikes, including one that explicitly targeted and executed a 16-year-old-boy. Political leaders like Obama see drones as an acceptable "*middle ground*" that allows for the implementation of U.S. force without, at least ostensibly, the traditional collateral of American casualties or civilian deaths.

Drone strike-related deaths are not the only consequence felt by civilians. One researcher explains how children living in a

region such as northern Pakistan – with heavy U.S. drone activity – *“become hysterical when they hear the characteristic buzz of a drone,”* which often circle overhead 24/7. The psychiatric toll this constant threat of violence takes on children is hard to imagine.

Despite the common refrain from U.S. government officials that weaponized drones offer an extremely “precise” method of targeting, the truth is that civilian casualties of weaponized drone attacks are a common occurrence. The indiscriminate nature of weaponized drone attacks is reminiscent of a much older though equally brutal weapon – landmines. Over the past several decades, human rights organizations, academics and activists have worked tirelessly to show the world that landmines maim and kill civilian populations, and therefore, their use should be banned. The public health community has played a pivotal role in this movement by, for example, conducting research which adds evidentiary support for the movement’s claims. The same tact should be taken with weaponized drones. Public health researchers should work with activists and human rights scholars to form a coalition that demands an end to the use of weaponized drones.

Professional societies such as the APHA could provide guidance highlighting the role of public health in ending the use of weaponized drones. This could take the form of a bold policy statement similar to the one APHA released in 2009 regarding public health’s role in the prevention of armed conflict.

With political leaders from both major U.S. parties seeing drones as a convenient workaround to the traditional pitfalls of American use of force, it is imperative that the public health community remind the world that these weapons have tragic consequences. It is our responsibility to lend our voices, research skills and positions of prominence to stop the use of weaponized drones and end the pain and suffering they cause.

***Featured Image:** *Emal Ahmadi surveys the damage to his home after a U.S. drone strike killed 10 of his family members in Kabul, Afghanistan, on October 2, 2021. MARCUS YAM / LOS ANGELES TIMES*

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William Bruno, M.D., is an emergency medicine resident physician at the LAC+USC Medical Center in Los Angeles, California. In addition to working clinically in the emergency department, William has research interests in humanitarian response and the ethics of conducting research in disaster settings. Follow William on Twitter: @williamjbruno.

NEI's Reaction to the Pentagon's Admission of Error in US Drone Strike in Kabul on 8/29/2021

Statement by Nutrition and Education International (Employer of Zemari Ahmadi in Kabul)

In the Pentagon's 9/17 briefing, General McKenzie admitted the 8/29 US drone strike in Kabul that killed Zemari Ahmadi and nine family members was a "*tragic mistake*." We are grateful for their recognition of the mistake. General McKenzie also confirmed that the recent DoD investigation into this strike was unable to establish any connection between ISIS-K and Zemari, his relatives, his Nutrition & Education International

(NEI) colleagues, and NEI's Kabul compound. We appreciate that these false accusations have finally been cleared.

The General's statement confirms what was previously reported in the media and what NEI has known all along. We are grateful that the media coverage has been proven accurate and that Zemari's honorable name can be restored. NEI thanks the in-depth investigative reporting by the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, ABC, CBS, NPR, Associated Press, as well as many other regional news outlets for bringing these facts to light.

We are pleased that the Department of Defense is exploring ex gratia payments to Zemari's remaining relatives and others involved in this unfortunate incident. General McKenzie says this will be difficult as the DoD has no presence on the ground. NEI is offering to be the DoD's main point of contact with Zemari's family and NEI's Afghan colleagues through its Kabul office. However, we are still waiting to be contacted by the DoD to help facilitate this process.



Source: Nutrition and Education International

At this point, NEI's primary concern is for the safety and welfare of Zemari's remaining relatives in Kabul. Although

General McKenzie delivered a general apology for this drone strike, NEI hopes the DoD will also apologize directly to Zemari's remaining relatives. We hope that lifetime financial support will be provided to Zemari's wife and daughter as it will be impossible for them to survive without Zemari and his brothers in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. We also hope the DoD will expedite processing of P2/SIV visas for Zemari's relatives, as well as provide resettlement support.

NEI is also concerned for the safety of its remaining Afghan colleagues who are now branded as ISIS terrorists. We are hoping the DOD will directly apologize to these colleagues, expedite the processing of their P2/SIV visas, and provide resettlement support.

** This is what they say, whether it is fully in alignment with our stance is not the point. They are standing by the Ahmadi family to the best of their ability.*

In Honor of Zemari Ahmadi, NEI will Continue on in its Vision and Humanitarian Efforts

Due to unsettling recent events, many of our soy farmers, especially in the Northern provinces, have fled their homes to seek refuge in Kabul. These internally displaced refugees, primarily women and children, are suffering from a lack of food, water, and other necessities. To honor Zemari, NEI will continue to work towards eradicating protein-energy malnutrition in Afghanistan. (*Zemari Ahmadi distributing soy-based meals in Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2021.*)

“America’s Longest War” Is Not Over!

by Brian Terrell, September 8, 2021

On August 31, President Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. stepped up to the White House podium, squared his shoulders, looked the American public straight in the eye – *and told them the biggest lie of his Presidency* (so far).

What he said was:

“Last night in Kabul, the United States ended 20 years of war in Afghanistan—the longest war in American history.”

But the U.S. war on Afghanistan did not end on August 31. It has only adapted to technological advances and morphed into a war that may be less visible—and therefore more politically sustainable.

It will also continue to destabilize the Middle East, immiserate and enrage its 246 million inhabitants, and fuel a massive new influx of violent jihadists recruits—formidably armed with our own abandoned weaponry and bent on revenge against America for the deaths of their families and friends. This will, of course, require the U.S. to launch even more drone bombing missions, which will kill even more Afghan people.

That is the perfect recipe for perpetuating the “*forever wars*” that Biden promised to end. But it is also a perfect reassurance to the military-industrial-intelligence complex, to which Biden promised, at a June 2019 campaign fundraiser, that “***nothing would fundamentally change.***”

In his speech on August 31, Biden himself admitted,

"We will maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and other countries. We just don't need to fight a ground war to do it. We have what's called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground—or very few, if needed."

Five days before, on the evening of Thursday, August 26, hours after a suicide bomb was detonated at the gate of Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport killing and wounding scores of Afghans trying to flee their country and killing 13 U.S. soldiers, President Biden spoke to the world, *"outraged as well as heartbroken,"* he said.

Many of us listening to the president's speech, made before the victims could be counted and the rubble cleared, did not find comfort or hope in his words. Instead, our heartbreak and outrage were only amplified as Joe Biden seized the tragedy to call for more war.

"To those who carried out this attack, as well as anyone who wishes America harm, know this: We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make you pay,"

he threatened.

"I've also ordered my commanders to develop operational plans to strike ISIS-K assets, leadership and facilities. We will respond with force and precision at our time, at the place we choose and the moment of our choosing."

The president's threatened *"moment of our choosing"* came one day later, on Friday, August 27, when the U.S. military carried out a drone strike against what it said was an ISIS-K *"planner"* in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province.

The U.S. military's claim that it knows of *"no civilian*

casualties" in the attack is contradicted by reports from the ground. *"We saw that rickshaws were burning,"* one Afghan witness said. *"Children and women were wounded and one man, one boy and one woman had been killed on the spot."*



A relative throws himself and weeps over the casket of Farzad, 12, who was killed by U.S. drone airstrikes, according to the family, in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Aug. 30, 2021. [Source: latimes.com]

Fear of an ISIS-K counterattack further hampered evacuation efforts as the U.S. Embassy warned U.S. citizens to leave the airport. *"This strike was not the last,"* said President Biden. On August 29, another U.S. drone strike killed a family of ten in Kabul.

The first lethal drone strike in history occurred in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, when the CIA identified Taliban leader Mullah Omar, *"or 98-percent probable it was he,"* but the Hellfire missile launched by a Predator drone killed two unidentified men while Mullah Omar escaped.

These two recent instances of *"force and precision"* ordered by Biden twenty years later marked the presumed end to the war there just as it had begun. The intervening record has not

been much better and, in fact, documents exposed by whistleblower Daniel Hale prove that the U.S. government is aware that 90% of its drone strike victims are not the intended targets.

Zemari Ahmadi, who was killed in the August 29 drone strike in Kabul along with nine members of his family, seven of them young children, had been employed by a California based humanitarian organization and had applied for a visa to come to the U.S., as had Ahmadi's nephew Nasser, also killed in the same attack.

Nasser had worked with U.S. Special Forces in the Afghan city of Herat and had also served as a guard for the U.S. Consulate there. Whatever affinity the surviving members of Ahmadi's family and friends might have had with the U.S. went up in smoke, that day. *"America is the killer of Muslims in every place and every time,"* said one relative who attended the funeral, *"I hope that all Islamic countries unite in their view that America is a criminal."* Another mourner, a colleague of Ahmadi, said *"We're now much more afraid of drones than we are of the Taliban."*

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Friends, relatives and colleagues of Mr. Ahmadi insist he could not possibly have had links to ISIS-Khorasan. [Source: [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com)]

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Thanks to Wikileaks, we have access to a CIA document from that year, ***Making High-Value Targeting Operations an Effective Counterinsurgency Tool***. Among the “key findings” in the CIA report, analysts warn of the negative consequences of assassinating so-called High Level Targets (HLT).

“The potential negative effect of HLT operations, include increasing the level of insurgent support ..., strengthening an armed group’s bonds with the population, radicalizing an insurgent group’s remaining leaders, creating a vacuum into which more radical groups can enter, and escalating or de-escalating a conflict in ways that favor the insurgents.”

The obvious truths that the CIA kept buried in a secret report have been admitted many times by high-ranking officers implementing those policies. In 2013, General James E.

Cartwright, the former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, reported in *The New York Times*,

"We're seeing that blowback. If you're trying to kill your way to a solution, no matter how precise you are, you're going to upset people even if they're not targeted."

In a 2010 interview in *Rollingstone*, General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, figured that *"for every innocent person you kill, you create 10 new enemies."* By the general's equation, the U.S. created a minimum of 130 new enemies for itself in the strikes ordered by President Biden on August 27 and 29 alone.

When the catastrophic consequences of a nation's policies are so clearly predictable and evidently inevitable, they are intentional. What has happened to Afghanistan is not a series of mistakes or good intentions gone awry, they are crimes.

In his novel, *1984*, George Orwell foresaw a dystopian future where wars would be fought perpetually, not intended to be won or resolved in any way and President Eisenhower's parting words as he left office in 1961 were a warning of the *"grave implications"* of the *"military-industrial complex."*

Wikileaks founder Julian Assange noted that these dire predictions had come to pass, speaking in 2011:

"The goal is to use Afghanistan to wash money out of the tax bases of the U.S. and Europe through Afghanistan and back into the hands of a transnational security elite. The goal is an endless war, not a successful war."

No, the war is not over. From a nation that should be promising reparations and begging the forgiveness of the people of Afghanistan comes the infantile raging, *"We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will hunt you down and make*

you pay” and while pledging to perpetuate the conditions that provoke terrorism, the parting taunt “and to ISIS-K: We are not done with you yet.”

That the U.S. is not done with Afghanistan is seen further in the scramble to recruit new intelligence assets such as Ahmad Massoud, 32, commander of the Tajik-dominated National Resistance Front (NRF), which continues to fight a low-level insurgency in the Panjshir Valley against the Pashtun-led Taliban, who are viewed as a proxy of the Pakistan Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Massoud is the son of the legendary anti-Soviet fighter, Ahmad Shah Massoud, whom the CIA financed and equipped in the late 1990s before acquiescing to his assassination two days before the 9/11 attacks because he was against a full-fledged U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan.

The CIA’s nefarious activities in Afghanistan and perpetuation of the drone war are little debated in the simplistic dualism of U.S. partisan politics where the issue seems to be only whether the current president should be blamed or should be given a pass and the blame put on his predecessor. This is a discussion that is not only irrelevant but a dangerous evasion of responsibility. Twenty years of war crimes makes many complicit.

In 1972, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, [and] in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.”

All of us in the U.S., the politicians, voters, tax payers, the investors and even those who protested and resisted it, are responsible for 20 years of war in Afghanistan. We are also all responsible for ending it—definitively.

****Featured Image:** A man grieves during a mass funeral for members of a family was killed in a U.S. drone airstrike, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Monday, Aug. 30, 2021. ~ Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times*

Brian Terrell is a longtime Activist and lives on a Catholic Worker Farm in Maloy, Iowa. Brian is a founding member of the **Ban Killer Drones Network**. He has traveled to Afghanistan several times and been arrested numerous times in civil resistance actions opposing drone warfare.

A Big Win for Faisal bin Ali Jaber and for Reprieve

UK 'on notice' after court rules Germany Failed In Duty to Protect Innocent Civilians

Reprieve, March 19, 2019

A German court today ruled that the Government must do more to ensure its territory is not used by the US to carry out unlawful US drone strikes in Yemen. The case marks the first time a European country has been found to play an essential role in US drone strikes, with the Court holding that Germany's role means it has a duty to protect the right to life of those being targeted.

Faisal Bin Ali Jaber, a Yemeni engineer, brought the claim with two of his family members, with help from Reprieve and

ECCHR (European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights). Faisal's brother-in-law, Salem bin ali Jaber, was an imam who preached against Al Qaeda just days before the US killed him and his nephew, Waleed, a policeman, in August 2012. Faisal's relatives were offered a secret bag containing \$100,000 in US dollar bills as compensation from Yemeni intelligence, but the US has never admitted responsibility.

In its decision, the Court acknowledged that Faisal and his family *"are justified in fearing risks to life and limb from US drone strikes that use Ramstein Air base in violation of International Law"*. Ramstein Air base provides the satellite relay infrastructure – without which drone strikes wouldn't be possible.

It went on to state that there were *"weighty indicators to suggest that at least part of the US armed drone strikes...in Yemen are not compatible with international law and that plaintiffs' right to life is therefore unlawfully compromised."* The German Government's declarations to the contrary, according to the court, were based on *"insufficient fact-finding and ultimately not legally sustainable."* The Court also noted that the fact that Faisal and his family were denied a judicial review by the American courts of their relatives' deaths *"runs counter to the idea that there were any [independent investigations by US authorities]."*

The UK also facilitates the US drone programme. UK personnel have played a *"crucial and sustained role"* in the programme, with UK officials reportedly taking part in so-called *"hits"*, *"triangulating"* intelligence for targets lists, *"tasking targets"* via Menwith Hill, a base in Yorkshire, and by participating in a *"joint operations room"* with US and Yemeni forces in support of strikes.

The UK government has admitted that it works *"with allies"* to *"negate the threat"*, but has refused to answer further questions, including on what role UK bases are playing, the

legal frameworks around intelligence sharing for such strikes, and whether any safeguards exist. Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights in 2016 raised concerns that the UK Government demonstrated a "misunderstanding of the legal frameworks that apply" to the use of armed drones outside of war zones and warned that UK support for the US programme could potentially expose ministers and others to risk of criminal prosecution.

Jennifer Gibson, Reprieve lawyer for Faisal bin ali Jaber, said:

"This is a ground breaking result. The court has made one thing very clear to Germany – they can no longer hide in the shadows and absolve themselves of responsibility for the innocent lives being destroyed by Trump's illegal drone programme. The UK and other European countries are now on notice. They must hold President Trump to account and stop being complicit in these crimes."

Faisal bin ali Jaber, said:

"I brought this case because I don't want any other families to suffer the way that mine has. Losing innocent family members, by mistake, to a US drone strike is something that no one should have to go through. The US drone programme could not function without support from European countries like Germany and the UK. It is long past time these Governments stepped up to prevent more innocent people being killed by US drones."

Messages from Iraqi Refugees, Cankiri Turkey

from Cathy Breen, May 6, 2015, Cankiri, Turkey

Dear Friends,

As I write I am looking out a bus window at a beautiful landscape of rolling hills and mountains. Everything is green, and the trees are budding. It is hard to know where to begin. In the past week, I have traveled hundreds of miles by bus and train in order to visit Iraqi refugees living here. Eskisehir, Ankara, Bolu, Mersin and now Cankiri. Some of the families are refugees twice over, having fled to Syria where we first met them some years ago. Others fled more recently after ISIS took Mosel last June and then the surrounding villages. Some of them I was meeting for the first time. Muslims, Christians and Palestinians, all from Iraq.

Last night Iraqi friends, refugees themselves, took me to a family I had not yet met. I thanked them for receiving me and explained how many people come with me on this trip wanting to know how he and his family are doing. Upon hearing this, he could hardly contain his emotions, his words spilling out rapidly.

"We have been waiting for someone to come!" he exclaimed. "We needed someone to visit us. We are happy that someone is thinking of us."

A handicapped sister, 39 years of age, sat on the floor beside



him. His wife and four sons surrounded him: 21, 19, 15 and 10 years of age. The family has only been registered by the Turkish government, and were given a date of December 2021 for their interview with the UNHCR. At this time, almost six years from now, their history

will be taken and the family will be asked if they have relatives anywhere else in the world. Only then might they be considered for resettlement. In the meantime, work is not permitted and children are not in school! How are they to live?

Earlier in the day I met with another refugee family with three children, ages 8 and 6 years and 4 months. They were given an interview date for the UNHCR of Sept. 2022. Yes, you read correctly seven years from now! None of the above mentioned children are in school. By 2022 these children will be 15 and 13 years of age, and the youngest just turning school age. The father's parents are both in Australia, but the UNHCR will not register that fact until 2022, unless their interview date is moved forward. The father said he pled repeatedly with the clerk at the registration office to give them a date not so far in the future.

The family I am staying with also have a 10 year old child with cerebral palsy in addition to two other daughters, 9 and 3 years old.

I held this child in my arms in Damascus, Syria in 2009. When

given no hope for resettlement, the father returned to Mosel with his wife and then, two daughters.

Both parents of the father recently received citizenship in Canada after being resettled there as refugees four years ago. The parents of the mother



have been recently resettled in Australia with refugee status. Because of his handicapped daughter, the family has been granted an interview date with the UNHCR for November of 2017. Only one and a half years to wait! Only at that interview however will their history be taken and the UNHCR will solicit information about family members living outside of Iraq. Only then might they begin the tedious path for resettlement.

One thing is clear. The UNHCR is completely overwhelmed by the refugee crisis, unable to offer protection, financial assistance, food rations, schooling, etc. Mothers and fathers are beside themselves with worry as their children are not in school. One refugee related how an Iraqi camped out in front of the UNHCR office for days in an attempt to draw attention to their plight. One of the guards told the demonstrator that Iraqi families had done the same and it had made no difference. *"Nobody cares"* is the general feeling.

Forced to look for work *"under the table,"* I heard multiple stories of Iraqis working 10 to 12 hour days for a fraction of the money Turkish people would receive for the same work or, worse yet, not receiving any compensation for their labor.

"We are like people drowning" was how one refugee described the situation. "All families are scattered, and we ask Americans who were behind all this to help Iraqis now."

Cathy Breen is a Catholic Worker who lives in NYC, and has made many trips to Iraq since the first Iraq War and the imposition of draconian sanctions of Iraq in the 90s. She has been there at least twice over the last 3 years. This is the third of a series of reports she wrote during her most recent trip this spring.

Messages from Iraq: Erbil

from Cathy Breen, Erbil, Kurdistan, Northern Iraq, April 28, 2015

Dear Friends,

Each year Catholics read from the Book of Acts in the period following the Easter celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. This morning's reading speaks of "*those who had been scattered by the persecution.*" Over a span of more than eight years, I had ample opportunity as Voices for Creative Nonviolence to meet many Iraqi Christian refugees in Jordan and Syria. I was often gripped by their stories, and the visions and dreams given to them as the "*suffering church.*"

Last September I had hoped to travel to the village areas surrounding Mosel to hear their voices, so often neglected since the U.S.-led war on their country over a decade ago. And then as we know, in early June of 2014, ISIS took the city of Mosel. I write all of this to help explain the deep emotions that welled up in me as I entered one of the compounds for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Erbil just two days ago. The Sunday service had just ended and people were streaming out of the tent that serves as their church.



This compound, called Oza city, in the Kasnizan area of Erbil in Kurdistan, houses approximately 900 Christian families, 400 Muslim families, and 35 Yazidi families. It is just one of many compounds in Erbil. Almost all of the Christians in this complex, if not all, come from

the village of Qaraqosh, a Syriac Catholic enclave, outside of Mosul.

In early August in a 24 hour period, more than 50,000 fled Qaraqosh, the total population of that village together with thousands they had given refuge to from Mosul. I would visit about eight or nine families in the course of the day, meeting the children and hearing accounts of their situations. Some of them were unable to share any of the details of their fleeing ISIS. It was just too painful.

It is important to note that the majority had fled their village twice, the first time in June due to warnings from ISIS, aka Da'ash. But after a few days the families felt they could return. On August 6th however, in the span of 24 hours, over 50,000 fled Qarakos. Da'ash had given people three days to decide their fate. To convert and pay money, or be executed.

As ISIS surrounded the village, they were able to stop people on the road as they fled. Cars were taken, and all of their money and jewelry. Even, at times, suitcases. One fighter took a baby's bottle saying "*Christians don't have the right to live.*" People continued on foot in the merciless heat with just the clothes on their back. The absence of suitcases and household items in the rooms I visited testified to this. Not a single family photo was on display.

One sister told me she knew a family where ISIS took the three

year old daughter, never to be seen again.

Three Dominican sisters live among the displaced, as well as two Redemptorist priests and a brother. They too are from Qaraqosh. One of the priests was wounded in 2004 when his car was crushed by a U.S. tank. A fellow priest in the car was killed. The priest who met with me can no longer go up the stairs as both of his legs suffered multiple breaks. A handsome man, he told us *"This was my first experience with Americans...Many people translating for the U.S. were killed...We are wounded on the inside."* He feels that people are being called to live in peace, respecting one another. "The differences between people is a source of richness for us. Our God is our future, we are on earth temporarily. Our God is our future" he repeated.

The other priest, dynamic and just as good looking, wanted to speak without a translator.

"The U.S. government has two faces: one of diplomacy, the other of Da'ash. Everyone knows what America is doing. America must confess and admit 'We have killed people and now we need to ask for forgiveness'. ...The U.S. has not only destroyed a country and a people, but the culture. And not just of Iraq. Of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine..."

It has been over a year since I have been in Iraq, and on this trip I have heard repeatedly in every place I have been, Muslim or Christian, a strong belief that Da'ash is a creation of the U.S., that the U.S. is responsible for Da'ash and is out to destroy Iraq. People ask themselves, and me, why?

The Dominican sister acting as my guide and translator throughout the day was as tireless as she was gracious. In the late afternoon we came upon an older gentlemen who was sitting on a mat visiting with two other men. This was in yet another compound in Erbil housing about 160 displaced Christian families from Qaraqosh. Some of the families are living 20

people in a small space.

Upon learning that I was from the United States, Mr. Shukrallah (which means thanks be to God), became agitated and angry. *"I want to write a letter to Obama" he said shaking his finger at me, 'in the name of everyone here.'* "

"I want to tell him that America did nothing for us. They did this to me." He has bone cancer. "We have nobody. Only God, because we are Christians. Obama sent the dogs [ISIS] to eat us. This is the reality. You have to bring my voice to Obama. Say to him for all the Christians from our village : You did bad for the Christian people in Iraq. I have cancer and cannot walk. In some way, Saddam Hussein was better than Obama even though he was a dictator. Because he [Saddam] did not treat us in this way."

He wanted my word. He wanted a promise from me that I would get this letter to Obama. I told him that ordinarily I would have little hope that such a letter would reach the president. But, I told him, because of all the faith I had witnessed this day in the people around me, I felt that such a miracle could be possible! As we took our leave, Mr. Shukrallah's anger had dissipated and he pressed my hand warmly. I find there is a great need for Iraqis to be able to express themselves to someone from the U.S. It humbles me to be the representative.



There is much to write, but it will have to wait. Everyone, without exception, wanted to return to Qaraqosh. Everyone, without exception was tired and worn, worrying about the future, not seeing any way out. But each one, without exception, said their faith had deepened in these times of

great trial. I assured them that many people come with me on this trip wanting to express their solidarity and friendship. When I asked what, if anything, we could do the response was

“Pray, pray, pray.”

***Cathy Breen** is a Catholic Worker who lives in NYC, and has made many trips to Iraq since the first Iraq War and the imposition of draconian sanctions of Iraq in the 90s. She has been there at least twice over the last 3 years. This is the second of a series of reports she wrote during her most recent trip this spring.*

Messages from Iraq: Karbala

from Cathy Breen, Karbala, Iraq, April 23, 2015

Dear Friends,

As I attempt a first writing for this trip to Iraq, Kurdistan and Turkey, I ask myself if there is a salient theme, or themes, emerging. Perhaps they would be: family, war and refugees.



I am presently in Karbala which is housing approximately 70.000 refugees, the majority from Nineveh (Mosel) and Anbar. As I traveled by car two days ago from Najaf to Karbala, the road was lined with makeshift tent-like structures, pieces of cloth to provide some privacy and shelter

Last night I attended a local home-meeting of volunteers who are trying to attend to the needs of the refugees. I was allowed to sit in to hear about the work they are coordinating. The group had been informed that I was from the U.S. and involved in humanitarian work. I introduced myself, trying to be brief. I also mentioned that I was trying to get a certain medicine for an Iraqi refugee child with cerebral palsy in Turkey. Could they help me?

"The case you just presented is just a drop in the bucket," was the reply of the first gentleman to speak. *"I have a mosque with seven families, 40 people. One of their children died of thirst on the way because the Kurds would give them no water. It took them seven days to get here from Erbil."* Another said *"We have a family of orphans. The father, a soldier, was killed in Fallujah defending Sunnis. He did not receive any salary."*

I have written before how I often feel my presence in Iraq, as someone from the U.S., opens deep wounds. Last night was no exception. Although I am sure constrained out of respect, feelings of anger and indignation erupted throughout the room.

It seemed that each person wanted to have their say. And had a right to their say to someone from the United States.

- America didn't come to Iraq to protect Iraq. They are taking money for weapons, but we still don't have weapons. We have to resort to getting weapons from Russia.
- The only good thing was the taking down of Saddam Hussein.
- The U.S. opened the way for ISIS to come in.
- We are certain that the U.S. knows what is going on.
- Does anyone speak about or care about Depleted Uranium and the increase in cancer among our people?

One man said *"I have lived in Canada and visited the U.S. The people there are simple people, controlled by the media. We are not accepted when we talk because of the way we look. You are more acceptable."*

But I too wonder if anyone will listen. How can the minds and hearts of the people in the United States be reached?

On the TV yesterday there was a funeral of a soldier in the holy shrine of Imam Hussein, venerated son of Imam Ali. The funeral was being broadcast live and afterwards the scene shifted to Imams and others going to the nearby Hussein hospital to visit the bedside of wounded soldiers. I just learned that in Tikrit it took about 3 hours to go a distance of approx. 100 yards, due to bombs placed by Daash (IS) in doorways, trashcans, cars, under dead bodies, etc. In the space of one hour 18 soldiers were killed by such explosives!

One of the daughters in the family I am staying with is to be married in about two months. Her fiancé is in the army and stationed in Falluja.

In Najaf just a couple of days ago I was with the Dean of the College of Nursing. I met her last year and again in the U.S.

when she was passing through NY city with a small delegation. She was good enough to see me on very short notice, and welcomed me graciously. When just the two of us were in conversation, I asked her how things were. *"We are a country at war"* she replied. Her nephew, she said, *"like a son to me"* is in the army in Falluja and she is worried about him. I could hear the strain in her voice. And then quite unexpectedly she asked me *"Why did you come?"* I hesitated a moment and then answered *"To see you."* She seemed, as I had been, caught unawares, but at the same time genuinely pleased by the answer.



The emotions raised in last night's meeting will be with me for some time. It seems the bonds of human friendship and solidarity have been strained almost to the breaking point. And yet the mutual gratitude and warmth in our parting last night leave no doubt that these bonds still remain.

Whenever I am able to, I assure those I meet that there are countless people who come with me on this trip to bear witness to their reality, to hear their voices and convey their words at home, and to express their deep solidarity in these desperate times.

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