



# Iraq: Stories of Hope Amid Despair

## IN THIS ISSUE

- 3 Medical Challenges In Iraq:  
One Response**
- 5 Delivering is Never Remote**  
by Cedric Turlan
- 8 “You Are Ready”**  
by Ed Nyce
- 9 The 45-day Trip**  
by Ammar S. Hamad
- 10 Looking Deeper**  
by Ed Nyce
- 12 Further Resources**

## Introduction

by Janet M. and Rick Janzen

“Welcome to Kurdistan” were the words that greeted us when we landed in Sulaimaniyah in northern Iraq in May, 2006. Increasing numbers of international flights were arriving and leaving the recently constructed or renovated airport. Kurdish flags seemed to be flying everywhere. Those in our group from the United States were hailed as “liberators.”

Everything we saw seemed designed to make northern Iraq as Kurdish as possible as quickly as possible. The general understanding appeared to be that the greater the gains could be now, the more would remain if the situation rolled back on itself.

At the same time, we agonized about whether it was safe to stop in Baghdad on the way back to Amman. The relative security of the northern part of the country highlighted the tremendous insecurity in the rest of Iraq. Military actions, car bombs, kidnappings and violence in any number of other forms had already become standard, daily occurrences; a sense of chaos and lawlessness had already steeped its way into the Iraqi consciousness.

These two inter-connected aspects of life in Iraq, growing division and escalating violence, have characterized the country since the invasion in the spring of 2003 and the subsequent occupation of Iraq by foreign forces. Horrifying stories are told of people being thrown out of their houses and neighborhoods during the night—or even being killed—for being associated with the wrong type of Islam. Patriarch Zakka of the Syrian Orthodox Church estimates that 50% of his Iraqi parishioners are either displaced within

Iraq or have left for neighboring countries. And, as indicated by the example of the north, the country is ever-more being divided along Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish lines.

Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC) most recent history in Iraq began in 1998 (MCC also worked in Iraq 1953–56, and 1991). That work since 1998 can be divided into two eras: the era of international sanctions and the occupation era. Maintaining a programmatic presence in or with Iraq has been a challenge in both of these eras. However, it is noteworthy that even now, when the security situation is at an all-time low, MCC partners continue to function and even material resource shipments find their way to where they are most needed.

The following short review highlights MCC’s recent work in Iraq, and also indicates some of the challenges and changes over the years.

### Personnel

MCC has assigned ten people to the Iraq program since 1998. The primary duties of these MCCers have revolved around program coordination or management, and advocacy. These assignments have not been without challenges. Obtaining or maintaining visas has been an ongoing issue; travel back and forth from Amman to Baghdad has sometimes been difficult; MCC workers have sometimes felt isolated or lonely; and the situation and relationships in Iraq have been complex and confusing. The greatest issue overall, however, has been safety or security. MCC workers have been keenly aware of the potential danger of living or

**Close personal relationships with a variety of Iraqis has been key to MCC's program.**

visiting Iraq. At the same time, they have sometimes been caught between the feeling that they are abandoning Iraqi friends and partners when they have left the country, and the comments from some partners that having MCCers in the country endangers them as Iraqis.

While there always were some questions about how safe MCC workers were in Iraq, the situation became particularly uncertain following the 2003 invasion by the American-led coalition forces. Not only was there significantly increased danger of being caught in “random” violence, the incidence of “targeted” violence also increased dramatically. The kidnappings of both Iraqis and expatriates was a crucial factor in, first, determining that MCCers should not live in Iraq and then, later, that visits to central Iraq would be extremely limited or even curtailed.

As with many MCC programs, the presence of personnel has been the back-bone or framework for all the other work. An “on-the-ground” presence (even when that has been in Amman, Jordan, these past years instead of Baghdad) has defined MCC's role. Close personal relationships with a variety of Iraqis, both MCC partners and others, has been key to MCC's program. Some of the details of the program are mentioned below, but it is important to note here the significant contribution that MCC workers have made to the vision, development and operation of the NCCI—the NGO Coordinating Committee of Iraq. This consortium of both local and international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has served its members well—from sharing programmatic information to taking the lead on evaluating and broadcasting security information.

### **Partners and Projects**

As with programs elsewhere in the world, MCC in Iraq has been doing programming through local partners. In the early years, MCC involvement included work in greenhouse/tomato projects and in school reconstruction, for example. More recently there has been more emphasis on capacity building with and through Iraqi NGOs, and peacebuilding projects or programs. As one part of the peacebuilding program MCC has sponsored 16 Iraqis to attend Eastern Mennonite University's Summer Peacebuilding Institute in the past four years.

MCC's expenditures in Iraq throughout the last decade total over US\$ 15 million, including about US\$ 10 million of food and material resources. The grants and the food and material resources supported the various

projects of MCC partners. The food and material resources have included medical supplies, medicines, school kits, relief kits, lentils, wheat, oil and blankets.

In addition to supporting projects with its own resources, MCC has facilitated the use of resources from other agencies that wanted to work in Iraq but had no programmatic presence there. The most significant collaborative effort of this sort was the All Our Children project through which MCC provided the program management and implementation support in Iraq for about a million dollars of funds from other United States organizations.

### **Advocacy**

An ongoing concern has been how to properly advocate for the situation in Iraq. It has not always been easy to determine what to advocate for, or how best to do advocacy.

A significant amount of solid advocacy was done around the issue of the humanitarian cost of the sanctions. While in some ways this was a fairly straightforward issue—the sanctions were inflicting tremendous unnecessary hardship on the civilian population—these kinds of issues are easily politicized. So, one of the politicized discussions became whether, or how, an easing of sanctions might serve to prop up the existing political regime.

Later, as a US-led invasion seemed imminent, advocacy efforts became focused on avoiding the war. The objections heard were from those who considered an overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime a lesser evil than the war it would take to bring about the regime change.

In the past three to four years advocacy efforts have been severely hampered by the fact that MCC does not have staff living in Iraq, or even visiting with any regularity. Nonetheless, efforts to help MCC constituents and the governments of Canada and the United States recognize the futility—and tremendous human and fiscal cost—of military solutions to “problems” like Iraq have continued. (This *Peace Office Newsletter* is one more effort in that direction, as was the Newsletter of July-September 2002 [see the website address on the back page of this issue].)

### **Current Status**

The current status in Iraq remains dire. The number of deaths, injuries and interrupted lives keeps mounting; the damage to the infrastructure—physical and political—shows no signs of abating. There is a major

**While the current status in Iraq remains dire, remarkably, MCC partners continue to function.**

of issue of population displacement within Iraq and to surrounding countries, recently put at about four million people.

Remarkably, MCC partners continue to function. From its base in Jordan, MCC Iraq continues to support Iraqi partners as they valiantly try to maintain a program presence, and a shred of hope. MCC has several staff assigned to the Iraq program, though the summer of 2007 is a time of significant staff transition. In addition to MCC's ongoing base budget for the program in Iraq, a recent above-budget allocation of US\$400,000 has been designated for "Uprooted Iraqis."

What the future holds is unclear. In May, 2006 one Iraqi partner told us, "We are anticipating at least another seven years of uncertainty in Iraq—an unwanted civil war and an unofficial federalism." Sadly, that prediction of seven years might end up being optimistically short.

*Janet Martens Janzen and Rick Janzen are Europe and Middle East Directors for Mennonite Central Committee.*

**What the future holds is unclear.**

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## Medical Challenges In Iraq: One Response

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*"The hospital is re-opened again but not functioning. It is working at only 10 percent of its capacity. There are snipers on the roofs in the neighboring buildings targeting people and preventing them from accessing the hospital. Those who successfully reach the hospital will find it empty of doctors and supplies. The staff is reluctant to come in this harsh environment and there is no night-shift at all."*

A doctor was updating me about the work in an Iraqi hospital. The doctor and I work with a humanitarian non-governmental organization (NGO). I used to work and live in Baghdad but moved one year ago to our base in Amman after my family was threatened. I work with the expatriate team as the general coordinator to manage our programs from a distance in what we call "remote management." This is one of the consequences of the civil war and widespread violence in Iraq.

Our organization has been working in Iraq since 1997, mainly in the health sector. Our strategy in post-2003 Iraq has focused on supporting the provision of life-saving and emergency health services, tasked to vie with the increasing numbers of daily mass casualties that can reach 125 victims per day.

The Burn Unit in the hospital referred to above was recently rehabilitated by our organization to improve the provision of medical services. It is one of the few such units working in the country, and the hospital is located in one of the most currently dangerous districts in Baghdad. It is a teach-

ing hospital where the doctors of the medical schools are practicing.

The hospital is one example of many that describes the health services in Iraq, already devastated by eight years of war with Iran (1980–1988), the first Gulf War (1991), and over 12 years of UN sanctions (1991–2003). The health situation was tenuous before the 2003 war began. Four years after the beginning of the war, the indicators reveal that the health sector remains unimproved. No major action was taken to support the reconstruction of the health structure in Iraq. As an example, Qaim hospital in the west of Anbar Province is still providing its medical services from tents after the destruction of almost 70 percent of the hospital caused by air bombing by the American-led Multi-National Forces (MNF) in late 2005.

A study which we conducted regarding the condition of "Burn Units" in the hospitals of Baghdad showed that in August 2005 there were seven units with a total capacity of 94 beds. Two of the units were closed due to deterioration of the physical structure of the buildings. The rest can provide only low quality services, which results in the death of the majority of patients affected by infections. The context of burn management in Baghdad has worsened in the past two years. For all of Baghdad, there are only four units now working with only 69 beds.

This not due to lack funds for construction. Rather, it is a result of mismanagement and corruption on all levels of the ministry and

**This hospital is one example of the health services in Iraq, already devastated by eight years of war with Iran (1980–1988), the first Gulf War (1991), and over 12 years of UN sanctions (1991–2003).**

**We doctors dare not announce immediately the death of a victim. We pretend we are still trying to do something, otherwise we might be attacked by the relatives.**

**We are trying to support the emergency rooms with essential items like cotton, gauze, sutures, IV fluids, and X-ray film.**

**More than half the registered Iraqi doctors have fled the country since 2003 because of threats, kidnappings and murders.**

its departments. In addition, under-resourced state hospitals struggle to cope with the carnage from suicide attacks and car bombings. All the health facilities are suffering from a severe shortage of medicines, medical consumables and equipment.

“The ER gets HYS,” said a doctor working in Yarmouk hospital, who requested his name not be mentioned. He was bitterly describing a day in the Emergency Room (ER) after an explosion happened. HYS means “Hysteria” in Doctor’s slang.

“In a moment the ER becomes full of people,” he said. “Ambulances drop down three bodies at once, private cars bring the injured, we keep jumping between victims trying to find the critical case to save, and more and more are coming to the ER. Relatives hearing about their victims are surrounding the doctors and shouting and crying for them to save them. We doctors dare not announce immediately the death of a victim. We pretend that we are still trying to do something, otherwise we might be exposed to be attacked by the relatives.” Policemen and relatives of victims often threaten the staff and shoot outside and inside the hospital and the emergency rooms. “There are not enough beds for all the injured, corridors are full with them lying on the ground, which is all covered by blood. Many of the injured could have been saved, but we do not have enough supplies, sometimes, even for basic first aid. All hospitals are far from being prepared to face the increasing needs and to help the daily casualties.”

The system of delivering medical items to health facilities in Baghdad supplied by the Ministry of Health (MoH) fails to cover the needs, for many reasons. The main MoH warehouses where the strategic reserves are stocked are located in a very dangerous district of Baghdad. Staff from many hospitals in Baghdad hesitate to go there to collect their monthly share. Four staff members from Imam Ali hospital, one of the biggest hospitals in the Shia’a Sadr city, were killed when they were getting their allotment. Conditions are not better for hospitals in Sunni areas as they have to cross dangerous districts on the way to and from.

Outside Baghdad, in the various governates of Iraq, delivery of medical items is also risky and uncertain. Trucks carrying materials from Ministry of Health warehouses in Baghdad to other parts of the country are often attacked on the roads between cities by militias and are prevented from delivering supplies on time. Once the supplies reach the Directorate of Health in the center of the

governorate, staff again faces risks to get the supplies to the hospitals in the different towns of the governorate. In addition, the amount of supplies and medicines provided by the MoH is never enough to cover the increasing needs of the health facilities. All groups within Iraq suffer due to these realities.

Our organization’s field team is receiving almost daily requests from emergency department managers for emergency supplies of consumables and drugs. The requests seldom vary: “We have just received xx (usually 20–30) car bomb/mortar/gun shot casualties, our stock will not cover the needs. We contacted the Ministry of Health, but as usual, there was no response. Can you send us some medical supplies, please?”

Through our program we are trying to fill this gap and support the emergency rooms with essential medical consumables and life-saving items like cotton, gauze, sutures, IV fluids, and X-ray film. Equipment is also supplied. Assistance is based on a needs assessment, and our team is supporting hospitals in almost every governorate in the center and south of Iraq. What we distribute can help the hospital to continue working for one to two weeks depending on the load it faces, but the needs are still big and require serious action by the government and the humanitarian agencies.

The shortage will undoubtedly increase after damage resulting from a big fire set by arsonists in one of the warehouses not long ago. Expectations for the losses are about \$150 million in drugs and medical supplies, including the reserve of vaccinations supplied by UNICEF.

Our organization cannot intervene in all types of shortage. Hospitals are also suffering a dearth of medical staff. One doctor from our organization who is currently employed part-time in a hospital in Baghdad has seen the numbers of that hospital’s staff decrease in the past two years from 60 to 70 doctors until only 37 are now left to treat severely injured casualties. Four were killed in the past year, three of whom were senior doctors with extensive experience. This situation has been verified in most major hospitals across Baghdad and the Western and Central Governorates. According to figures from the Iraq Ministry of Health, more than half the 34,000 registered Iraqi doctors have fled the country since 2003 because of threats, kidnappings and murders. More than 2000 registered doctors have been killed since 2003, and more than 200 have been kidnapped. Other estimates put the figure higher.

Hospitals are not safe places anymore, neither for doctors nor for patients. Many hospitals have been targeted and affected by military operations that are taking place in different parts of the country. No humanitarian law is respected by any of the fighting forces, even the government and the MNF. Al Qaim hospital, on the border with Syria, was destroyed in a shelling. Numan Hospital in Baghdad's Adhamiya district was raided by Iraqi forces: many patients were arrested, the rest fled, and the hospital was closed for two days. The water and electricity were cut from Samarra hospital in Salah Adeen for more than a week like the rest of the city. The news told of seven infants needing incubators who died because of the power cut. Sadly, this happens often. Power is usually fed to the city for a few hours per day, and it is cut during military operations by the government and MNF. The hospital cannot run the generators all of the time that the power is off due to lack of fuel. Meanwhile, the water station that provides water to Samarra is not working because there is no electricity and fuel to operate the station. In addition to the major shortages, there are the sectarian abductions and assassinations by militias on medical premises and in hospitals, targeting both patients and personnel.

This hazardous environment does not make an exception for aid workers and our team

working there. Strict safety measures have to be taken wherever we act, whether to do assessments or carry out distributions. We must have people of different sects on the team to enable us to serve all locations. The selection of the drivers and the trucks is also subjected to these realities.

We used to live with a spirit of brotherhood among ourselves in Iraq. I feel proud knowing that we have succeeded in maintaining the spirit of brotherhood among our teams. I note it when I see everyone keen to respond to needs from any side without first checking the sect or eyeing the location. This seed will grow and become strong one day.

The difficulties of the work increase day after day. When violence is a way of life and killing is the daily ration, one might feel suffocated and near despair. Indeed, we often feel helpless and hopeless, because what we are doing is like a drop in the sea. We work hard and try to fill the gaps, but the gaps are increasing and the situation is deteriorating. But we only have to look into wounded eyes or to consider how the mother of a patient would feel if she could continue to have her child alive with her, and that is enough to give us a push to continue the work, relying on God and hoping things will get better.

*Editor's Note: The author and other people mentioned in this article remain anonymous due to consideration for their safety.*

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## Delivering is never remote

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by Cedric Turlan

The Iraq crisis might appear to be over-reported in the media, especially regarding violence and the death toll. There is also, in fact, coverage about the issues of human rights or refugee matters, and that coverage has increased since the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) conference held in Geneva on April 17–18, 2007. However, because so much of the media coverage focuses on the violence and death toll in Iraq, the refugee and human rights crises may seem “forgotten” in contrast.

The refugees' situation is worrying and needs to be highlighted globally. Support is urgently required for the refugees and for the hosting countries, but also through international resettlement. Indeed, some coun-

tries like Jordan and Syria are already overwhelmed with Iraqi refugees who have fled their own country.

But the refugee problem is only the tip of the iceberg of Iraq's humanitarian crisis. The situation of Iraqis who are still living in Iraq is much more worrying. Consequences of the violence in Iraq are under-reported in the mainstream media, particularly on the front pages.

The present reality is that Iraq—once the Middle East's most developed country—today has indicators of well-being that are normally associated with much poorer countries. More than 11 million people are estimated to be living below the poverty line.

**Support is urgently required for Iraqi refugees, for the hosting countries, and for international resettlement. But the situation of Iraqis who are still living in Iraq is much more worrying.**

**Prior to 2003 the few International Non-Governmental Organizations operating in Iraq were labeled as spies by the regime.**

According to the United Nations (UN) Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action published in April 2007, eight million people—one Iraqi in three—are estimated to be in need of immediate assistance as a consequence of the Iraq humanitarian crisis.

In central Iraq, the entire population suffers and may be targeted by violence at any moment. Personal security, health care, education and public services—including access to clean water, electricity and sewage—are almost all non-existent or, at best, a fraction of pre-war standards. Countrywide, only 32 percent of Iraqis have access to safe drinking water while, in some tense areas, inhabitants are reduced to drinking water from rivers. Over 4 million people were considered subject to food insecurity in 2005 when the overall situation was not as bad as it is today. The health system is collapsing because of the lack of medicine, the targeted violence against health workers that has pushed many of them to flee, and the occupation and destruction of health facilities by belligerents. The sewage system has almost collapsed and only 19 percent of Iraqis have access to a functioning sanitation system. Even in the capital, entire neighborhoods may lack electricity for several consecutive days, which is a torment in summer temperatures that reach 50 degrees centigrade (122° Fahrenheit). Four million Iraqis are reportedly displaced now. There is also a high level of psychological trauma, millions of people injured, families destroyed, and some 80 percent of children do not attend school regularly.

**Several non-humanitarian armed groups have presented some of their activities as “humanitarian,” thereby blurring the line and reinforcing misperceptions.**

The analysis of the humanitarian situation inside Iraq is severely constrained by the extreme difficulty encountered to collect accurate data that is vouched for by all parties. The best that can be done currently is to examine as many indicators of welfare as are available. The main challenges are to determine numbers and locations of the most affected people, to determine standards and methods to provide assistance, to advocate for resources to provide the assistance, and to plan for the possible further deterioration of the situation. It is certain that conditions are not uniform countrywide, and the spread and intensity of humanitarian needs must be carefully estimated at the local level so that relief activities can be planned. The available data and indicators suggest that humanitarian conditions have continued to deteriorate in the past 12 months. Even if conditions remain unchanged it is urgent for humanitarian assistance to be increased for the people of Iraq immediately.

### **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as key actors on the field**

The overall objective of humanitarian aid is to provide lifesaving assistance and alleviate suffering. However the conflicts in Iraq are saturated with multiple stakeholders’ strategic interests and agendas, politicizing the context and compromising conditions of humanitarian access to the vulnerable. Prior to 2003 the few International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) operating in Iraq were labeled as spies by the regime. In 2003, the en-masse arrival of NGOs in Iraq with the American-led Coalition Forces reinforced the perception that NGOs were linked with the West. This misperception still exists in the current atmosphere of distrust today. Several non-humanitarian actors (military, private companies, non-state armed groups) have presented some of their activities as “humanitarian,” thereby blurring the line and reinforcing misperceptions.

The Iraqi Government’s capacity to administer and guide the country and to enforce the rule of law is extremely limited. Likewise, with the notable exception of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement (and the local NGOs), many international organizations have failed to respond to the needs in Iraq because they have not adapted their responses to the evolving and complex context. Additionally, their acceptance amongst the Iraqi population has been affected by 12 years of sanctions against Iraq and the use by many International Organizations of the Multi-National Forces (MNF-I) for security and logistics. On their side, NGOs have constantly adapted to seize opportunities as they arise at the local level through localized micro approaches and strategies. Difficulties in access mean that methods of delivery must be very innovative to address the needs of the affected. Establishing trust with affected communities is a priority. Through flexibility and adaptability and community-based interventions, NGOs are often the only humanitarian agencies remaining on the field, and are always concerned about the quality of aid they can provide. They continue to extend their services to numerous communities by building up the capacity of local organizations and their staff.

Nevertheless, humanitarian aid organizations and NGOs in the field have to strike a balance between the principles of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (CoC), which remains non-negotiable, and how to manage everyday realities to achieve their stated goals without

compromising their integrity. In this context it is important for NGOs to remember that there is a hierarchy within the principles of the CoC. At the top of this hierarchy is the statement “the humanitarian imperative comes first.” NGOs that adhere to the CoC to deliver humanitarian aid need to distinguish themselves from other types of agencies and to emphasize their neutrality and impartiality.

As a coping mechanism, NGOs currently operating in Iraq decided to maintain low profiles to avoid being targeted. Aid workers on the ground do not advertise where the aid is being brought from or whom they partner with, nor do they communicate their programs or interventions. In terms of perception this is a double-edged sword. One of the most perceptible results is that it is common to read in newspapers that NGOs are not present in Iraq. Yet, there are still tens of International NGOs and hundreds of Iraqi NGOs active in Iraq. On one hand the NGOs need to distinguish themselves from other groups so that they are not wrongly affiliated or perceived. At the same time, to build trust they need to be more visible in the community. The question invariably arises; does community acceptance improve security especially since the communities themselves are often not safe? In gaining acceptance, and providing aid, perceptions are nonetheless built.

Most foreign organizations working in central and southern Iraq have adopted remote programming strategies.<sup>1</sup> This complicates the efforts of Iraqi NGOs to develop relationships with international actors. This imposed distance has also raised a number of concerns with respect to the quality of the aid delivered, the Iraqi NGOs’ accountability, and the donor’s ability to appreciate and respond to the needs on the ground.

### **The need for Flexible, Inclusive and Locally-Based Strategies and Diversified Resources**

In Iraq it is obvious that Humanitarian Operational Space and access to persons in need can never be taken for granted. Many access points have already been identified, and some are already in use. Facilitators, often at a local level, have to be used to help with improving or creating access. The need

to have diversified, creative and adaptable staff requires adequate funding, since multiple staff means more expenses. NGOs have adapted and responded to the changing landscape in Iraq by using their mandates, charters and the CoC as reference points to guide their actions. Their ability to respond however is often constrained by a lack of flexible funding from a neutral source that supports their staff and other core costs as opposed to specific time-bound and donor-defined activities.

Furthermore, the withdrawal of some donors and limited funds from other sources for humanitarian assistance provided by many NGOs may significantly decrease the number of active NGOs at a time when humanitarian needs are at their most acute. The strategies of many stakeholders are elaborated at headquarters level, without an adequate knowledge of realities on the ground. The result is lots of guidelines, administrative requirements and rigid frameworks that are not adapted to the Iraq context and which often hamper the needed creativity, flexibility and non-formal intervention on the ground.

Despite their presence on the ground and their capacity to deliver, it must be stated clearly that NGOs cannot independently provide all the solutions nor respond to all the needs. A coordinated and inclusive strategy with locally-based approaches is needed in order to provide appropriate responses to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. There are urgent needs to which humanitarian actors can be expected to respond, and ways in which they can do so. Humanitarian agencies have obligations to uphold the rights of the people of Iraq. At a minimum, those rights include the right to receive humanitarian assistance through the provision of adequate shelter and resources including clean water, food rations and nutritional supplements, and provision of medical attention to those who are injured or sick. Humanitarian agencies and individuals can also play a vital role as advocates concerning the needs and situation of the people within Iraq.

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**In Iraq it is obvious that access to persons in need can never be taken for granted.**

1. Many International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in Iraq are said to be doing “Remote Programming”, meaning that part of their intervention and much of their management is run from safer areas. For more information regarding Remote Programming options, see NCCI report at: <http://www.ncciraq.org/spip.php?article 1222>.



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# “You Are Ready”

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by Ed Nyce

**Another requirement was openness to working together with people from different groups within Iraq.**

**They would be equipped to widen their funding base.**

**Let your mission be the attraction to those donors who will best match with your community's needs and dreams.**

It was the final morning of the two-and-a-half day training event. Dana Mohammed, Director of the Iraqi Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) REACH, and the facilitator for this training event, was addressing the eight participants. “You are ready,” he told them. “You are ready.”

The participants could have been forgiven if they harbored some lingering doubts. Not because of the training, which was comprehensive, focused, and sensitive to individual needs. Rather, they and the facilitator knew the circumstances waiting for them upon their return to their own communities.

From November 20–22, 2006, eight representatives of grass roots organizations from various parts of Iraq gathered in Sulaimaniya, in the northern and Kurdish region of the country.

Each person represented a different community-based organization (CBO). The CBOs' missions ranged from women's and children's rights to development and aid distribution. Participants came from Baghdad, Mosul, Samawa, Nasiriya, Basra, and Diyala.

The focus of the training was “social marketing.” If this sounds like it was a step up from a basic introductory level training session, that is true. Those who came were invited because their existing experience demonstrated a clear sense of mission, and a visible commitment to serving their communities via that mission.

It was obvious that another requirement was openness to working together with people from different groups within Iraq. Either as trainer or participant, there were one or more representatives from the following majority and minority groups: Shi'ia, Sunni, Kurd, and Yazziidi.

## **Working Through Community-Based Organizations**

REACH was founded in 1995. The acronym stands for “Rehabilitation, Education and Community Health.” Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has partnered with REACH since 2004. This 2006 workshop was made possible in large part via a grant from OXFAM.

Most of REACH's work is focused through a network of CBOs. Doing so is part of REACH's commitment to contribute to the capacity and sustainability of Iraq's local, nongovernmental efforts to rebuild and maintain Iraqi society.

There were three goals of the November 2006 conference. First, the CBO leaders were to be enabled to discover ways to increase income resources for their CBOs, including methods to generate resources themselves. Second, they would be equipped to widen their funding base to decrease their dependence on one or two donors as well as increase the total amount of funds received from the donor community. And, third, they would work at capacity building for the CBO itself.

In line with his own and REACH's philosophy, throughout the training Dana stressed themes such as the following.

1. You are in your community for the long haul, you have your ear attuned to the people, and you know what they need.
2. International donors sometimes come and go, but your ongoing presence gives you credibility and insights that outsiders cannot match.
3. Do not alter your mission for the sake of governmental or NGO funding. Otherwise, you will not be doing that for which you came into being in the first place! Rather, let your mission be the attraction to those donors who will in the end be the best match with you, your CBO, and your community's needs and dreams.

## **Encouragement**

There was another benefit that REACH hoped to provide for the participants. The REACH Program Manager, Saman Ahmad Majeed, explained why the group of participants had been taken out to a restaurant for lunch rather than have the meal be provided at the training site. “We went to the restaurant and are doing some other similar things so that the participants can get out and have some good, relaxing times,” he said. “In many of the places where they live, they cannot just go and enjoy an afternoon or evening somewhere, due to the difficult situation in their part of Iraq.”



Indeed, one participant who wore a tie and coat during some of the training sessions remarked that, in his area, he can no longer dress up if he goes out to eat, lest someone think he is wealthy or an official of some kind, and thereby be more likely to do him harm.

And then, after all the dedicated group work, after the several hours of homework assigned to the participants during two of the evenings, after the engaging manner in which the practical material was shared, after the opportunities to dress up to go out to eat, it was almost time to head home. The room was quiet, the atmosphere reflective. Even capable, committed people, those who

spend their lives enabling and empowering others, can use some encouragement, no less so if they are returning to danger. Fully aware of their reality, Dana Mohammad poignantly, respectfully reassured them.

“*Intu jabeziin*,” he said, and repeated, “You are ready.”

*Ed Nyce served with MCC in Amman as Iraq Advocacy Coordinator through August, 2007. He was MCC Peace Development Worker in Bethlehem, West Bank, 1999–2004. He currently lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Giacomo (Jack) Hijazin and Sarwar Ibrahim Arif assisted in the preparation of this article.*

**Even capable, committed people who spend their lives enabling and empowering others can use some encouragement, no less so if they are returning to danger.**

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## The 45 Day Trip

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by Ammar S. Hamad

### Introduction

On May 8, 2006, I went with three of my Iraqi colleagues to the Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia. After the long travel, I arrived at 3:00 in the morning. It was raining. The next morning the program’s activities began with a wonderful opening. I was one of a collection of participants from many countries, religions and cultures. There, the 45-day trip started.

There is no doubt for anyone that Iraq is experiencing an acceleration of conflict on many levels—political, economic, social, cultural, religious. This creates a big challenge for the activists in the peace-building and conflict-resolution field to contribute to civil peace building in Iraq. The small number of peace builders here feel under-equipped with the knowledge and experience necessary to form peace-building and conflict resolution teams inside Iraqi society. Therefore, we were eager to get a chance to learn and increase our experience and skills, to carry this knowledge to our society, and to spread the principles of a peace culture and civil living between the factions in Iraq.

Participation in SPI was very important toward this end. It has given me a substantial opportunity to acquire additional knowledge, skills and experience in the peace-building field.

My place of residence at EMU, Hillside, played a big role in introducing me to the participants from all around the world. There I was able to have discussions on a variety of topics. It gave me the chance to increase my awareness of many cultures and to benefit from others’ experience and knowledge. And it gave me the opportunity to communicate the reality of what is happening in Iraq, such as the conflicts and killing and destruction. We also exchanged information about other subjects in our lives.

The diversity in the seminars and in the trainers’ styles and discussion methods among the participants had an impact on me by increasing my abilities and skills in peace building and conflict resolution. I did have some difficulty with the language that the Americans spoke. But I received great benefit through the participatory style, the techniques represented, and the working groups. These learnings continue to influence my training style since coming back to my peace-building work in Iraq.

At SPI, I participated in the following four courses:

- Introduction to Conflict Transformation
- Practice: Skills for Conflict Transformation
- Conflict Sensitive Development & Peace-building
- Researching: Qualitative Evaluation

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**We were eager to spread the principles of a peace culture and civil living between the factions in Iraq.**

**The Iraqi Youth League implemented a project of conflict resolution and peace building among students in the Universities.**

### **The impact**

Since my return I have felt the influence of SPI in my work in many ways. Some examples include:

1. We implemented a workshop at the Iraqi Youth League (IYL) office in Baghdad for the IYL team about conflict resolution and civil peace building in Iraq;
2. I participated as a facilitator with the Non-Governmental Organization Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) in the workshop, "National Dialogue and its Influence in Conflict Resolution" in Amman, Jordan, in November 2006. I presented a concept paper, participated in forming the agenda of the program, and was a member of the committee that formulated recommendations;
3. IYL implemented a project of conflict resolution and peace building among the students in the Universities, funded by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC); one result of this program was preparing a Youth team, or as we called them, a Peacemakers Team;
4. Growing out of this, some of the Peacemakers Team participated as facilitators in the next programs of IYL in the peace-building field;
5. I participated as a trainer and program designer in the workshop, "Analyzing Conflict and Civil Peace in Iraq," with the Amman Center for Human Rights Studies in March 2007;
6. I designed the program "The Role of Youth in the Constitutional Modifications and Peace-building Process in Iraq," funded by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) which was held in Al-Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, in May 2007;
7. I have begun to prepare a training manual to improve the skills of conflict resolution and civil peace building in Iraq;
8. IYL has designed programs and projects for many local Iraqi nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like the Baghdad Humanitarian Organization, the Iraqi Foundation for Development, the Sadaa Center for Human Rights.

These are some of the ways in which attending SPI has been useful in my peace-building and conflict resolution work. The "45 days" continue to multiply into many more days of creatively addressing such needs in Iraq.

*Ammar S. Hamad is Director of the Iraqi Youth League (IYL), an independent local non-governmental, non-profit, non-political, non-religious organization, established in 2003. IYL is an organization with which MCC partners.*

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## **Looking Deeper**

by Ed Nyce

**There can be little movement toward lasting peace when talking about Iraq unless one refers to the presence and aims of the occupying power, the United States.**

I am one of many people who wonder when US troops will leave Iraq. Actually, I confess to wondering more "if" they will leave than "when."

In fact, it seems to me that another question is even more important than when soldiers will leave. And that question is, "When will the United States leave Iraq?"

This is one example of the deeper probing that is often missing in North American discussions about "the situation" in Iraq. In my view, there can be little if any movement toward real, lasting peace when talking about Iraq unless one refers to the presence and aims of the occupying power in Iraq, the United States.

This is not the only piece of the puzzle, of course. Bombings, kidnappings, and internal sectarian violence are also real. But history

teaches us that in an occupation, the aims and deeds of the occupier matter. Such is true even if asking when the occupier's own troops will "come home."

There are many issues to engage when wanting to broach the topic of superpower presence and purposes in Iraq. For instance, one could ask what the values and worldviews are of those who led the United States (US) into going to Iraq in the first place. Then must come the questions of whether these views and values are representative of many in the US (perhaps they are!), and whether these views and values lead to peace for all concerned parties.

Another important query is the degree to which the aims and priorities of regional US allies have played a role in US policy decisions.

Nonetheless, it seems that no issue holds the attention of the US public like the “troops” question. More broadly, that troops question is of major significance regarding the well-being of Iraqis and “the situation” in Iraq.

On April 15, 2006, an article by Associated Press Special Correspondent Charles J. Hanley was published, entitled, “Vast new Baghdad embassy dwarfs other U.S. missions.” According to Hanley, this “embassy” is to be set on 104 acres (42 hectares) of land, and to comprise 21 buildings. It is being built in the “Green Zone,” in the center of Baghdad. The embassy will have its own water and electricity sources, which are expected to be operable even when the actual residents of the city are facing shortages.

Embassies are not known to consume 104 acres of land. Hanley quotes the International Crisis Group (ICG) as calling the embassy “by far the largest in the world.” It is difficult for some to believe that such an entity could really be an embassy. Rather, says ICG, it “. . . is seen by Iraqis as an indication of who actually exercises power in their country.”

The embassy’s construction raises other questions when one thinks about the running of Baghdad, the flow of oil dollars, control of natural resources, potentially competing interests in the region between the US and Iraq or its neighbors. Is the United States ever planning to leave Iraq? When is the United States planning to be “just another country” in Iraq? Will the US do anything from its 21-building, 104-acre embassy that it would not favor other countries doing from their embassies in the US? How is the construction of what appears to many in the area to be a regional control

center rather than an embassy helping to liberate the Iraqi people? And how will the US “win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people” with never-ending supplies of water and power for its embassy, while the Iraqi people regularly do without?

It seems unlikely that security for such an operation would be left totally to non-US entities, or even to non-military contractors. The question of whether US soldiers stay in or leave Iraq must be placed in the context of the emerging new embassy and all it represents, while raising these two additional questions: (a) To what degree does the US genuinely seek to contribute to a decrease in the chaos in Iraq which the ongoing presence of its troops may abet? (b) To what degree is the presence of the troops designed to serve US goals in Iraq and in the region, whether or not those goals are shared by Iraq or its neighbors?

Without engagement of the questions above and others like them, “the situation” will continue in its long, gradual, downward spiral in and around Iraq for a very long time. The occupation of Iraq, even if more behind the scenes than presently, directed from a 21-building embassy, will go on. Iraqis will continue to bear the brunt of the violence, be it state-sponsored or otherwise.

Meanwhile, remarkable, courageous, committed peacemakers continue to do their work in Iraq; you have met some of them in this *Newsletter*. They are bright spots in a bleak situation. These bright spots are not to be confused with lights at the end of the tunnel. But they are bright spots nonetheless.

*Ed Nyce served with MCC in Amman as Iraq Advocacy Coordinator through August, 2007. He currently lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.*

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**Is the United States ever planning to leave Iraq?**



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## Further Resources

Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian*. Westminster, 1991. (From the author of *Call of the Minaret* and other noted resources on religion in the region.)

Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command*. Harper Collins, 2004. (A description of the decisions and their makers leading up to the 2003 US military action in Iraq.)

Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near*. Henry Holt, 2005. (Communicates directly and indirectly what it feels like to Iraqis, often through their own words, to be under a military operation. He captures both the violent beginnings of attack, and longer-term occupation. Sympathetically portrays experiences and emotions of average Iraqi citizens, Coalition soldiers, and others, while stimulating critical thinking regarding the venture.)

Wilfred Thesiger, *The Marsh Arabs*. (Describes life from ancient times in a portion of southern Iraq. Much of the marsh

area of which Thesiger writes was drained in the 1990s by Saddam Hussein. Attempts are being made to reintroduce the marshes.)

<http://www.markdanner.com/writing.htm> (articles on Iraq from Mark Danner in the *New York Review of Books*.)

[www.juancole.com](http://www.juancole.com) (University of Michigan professor and blogger who provides daily updates on the news from Iraq with valuable links to hard-to-find articles.)

<http://www.newyorker.com/archive/> (articles on Iraq from *The New Yorker*.)

<http://electroniciraq.net/> (Photos and article content from a variety of writers and bloggers.)

[www.ncciraq.org](http://www.ncciraq.org) (the website of the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq.)