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Returning to Iraq, US nurse sees war's effects

Megan Fincher | Sep. 28, 2013

As the debate continues over the possibility of U.S. military intervention in Syria, people wondering whether history is repeating itself need only look back 11 years to the fall of 2002. Back then, the nation in question was Iraq, Syria's neighbor to the east, and it was Saddam Hussein who reportedly was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, including those of a chemical nature.

The thought of U.S. intervention in Syria is creating a sense of déjà vu for many people, including Cathy Breen, an American nurse and longtime New York Catholic Worker who has spent years in the Arab world.

Breen, now 63, returned to Iraq last fall -- and again in May -- for the first time in nine years. In 2002, she joined Voices in the Wilderness, a campaign to end the U.S.-U.N. sanctions against Iraq, and helped deliver medicine to Iraqi children. She ended up staying for more than five months, during which time the United States conducted its "shock and awe" bombing campaign. In late 2003, Breen returned to Iraq for a three-month visit. Soon after, the U.S. Treasury Department fined Voices in the Wilderness for breaking sanctions, and the group disbanded in 2005.

In its wake, Voices for Creative Nonviolence was formed and Breen is now a co-coordinator. The new organization works for peace and reconciliation in the Middle East. When she is not traveling to Iraq, Breen also visits Jordan and Syria to advocate for Iraqi refugees.

NCR *interviewed Breen Sept. 3 to get firsthand knowledge of the current situation in Iraq, and, in a way, illustrate what could happen if the United States intervenes in Syria. Following is an edited transcript of that interview.*

***NCR*: What inspired you to visit Iraq more than 10 years ago?**
Breen: It was in 2002 that I was asked if I would consider joining the Iraq Peace Team [a subgroup of Voices in the Wilderness]. So I went in September of 2002 and I was able to stay on up until "shock and awe." ... The war changed my life. I'm a nurse by profession, and we were able to go to the bombing sites and the hospitals during the bombing campaign. At first I didn't do that, the first week, but then I really forced myself to do it and it's something I've never regretted. I recorded and took pictures of orphans, spoke with victims, went to bombing sites. I had friends that had done civil disobedience to try and stop the war, and they were then going to trial when I came back. I was more than once asked to be a witness on the stand, and I was never allowed to speak about the war or present those photos to juries. Imagine that I could have shown pictures of orphans and said, "This is what the protesters were trying to prevent."

Was that your most difficult time in Iraq?
In August of 2003, I went to Iraq again. This was about eight months into the occupation, and that visit actually had a more devastating effect psychologically and emotionally on me because then the violence was coming from everywhere, randomly. At least under "shock and awe" we knew that it was U.S. bombs and when that finished there was a sigh of relief: Oh, that's over. But no, it wasn't over, it was actually much more distressing. The kidnappings, the snipers, helicopters overhead, the tanks in the street, it was quite devastating for me

personally.

At some point you didn't go to Iraq for years. Why?
In January of 2004, Voices in the Wilderness made the decision that we could no longer go to central and southern Iraq because we would put Iraqis in danger, just by their mere association with us.

Tell me about your most recent visit to Iraq.
When I went back last October-November, of course it was to reconnect with old friends, to try and get in touch with Iraqis who were in Syria who have fled back to Iraq [because of the situation in Syria]. And then to make, of course, new acquaintances, and also to just get a sense of what people are experiencing and what their reality is. So I was able to, on that visit in October-November, visit holy Shia areas and I was able to go to exclusively Sunni areas. My question was, "How are people faring nine years, almost 10 years after the war?"

How are people faring?
When I left in November to return to the States, the last visit I received was from a father and his son and a woman orthopedic therapist who had made two leg prostheses for this 14-year-old boy. When he was returning home from school at 6 years of age, he stepped on an electrical wire downed by a U.S. bomb, and he lost both arms and both legs. And they had heard that I was in their area and came asking if I could help get him a prosthetic arm. His mother went blind [from grief] when this accident happened eight years prior, and she's still blind. And this child has never been able to touch anyone, caress anyone, feed himself, do anything for himself. I had that image in my head when I heard of the Boston Marathon bombing, also a tragic event.

Two bombs exploded at the Boston Marathon, killing three people, and this atrocity was covered around the clock for weeks on end, and will no doubt be memorialized. The New York Times front page headline read, "War Zone at Mile 26." I received emails from friends in Iraq expressing their condolences. The same day in Iraq, 18 bombs went off. At least 32 people were killed. On April 23, 111 people were killed, on the 24th, 86 were killed, on the 25th, 96 were killed, and on the 26th, at least 38 were killed. And I wondered if condolences were extended to their families.

What do Iraqis say about Americans?
I had an opportunity to talk with a holy man, a teacher of the Quran. I had quite a long time with him with an excellent translator. I was with him in the evening, at his home. I met his wife and kids and the next day we traveled together. And I asked him what he felt the effects of violence have been on Iraqis. A little bit into the conversation he said, and I quote, "We consider the American people, as represented by the American soldiers who fight against us, as war criminals. We saw how they were cruel and savage, how tanks ran over innocent people. It became normal for households to lose loved ones. We saw terrorists, whom we caught and handed over to the U.S. troops, later released. Many wrongs are credited to Islam. The U.S. was wrong to bring terrorism to Iraq."

How do young Iraqis feel about the state of their country?
I spoke with a young man, an English teacher in a rural, outlying village. And he was telling me, "The situation is very bad in Iraq. ... The regime didn't serve the people, now the government doesn't either. I see no hope for Iraq. The boys don't want to learn, they've been affected by the war, turned into beasts. They have seen only blood and killing. They are violent with no principles, with no respect."

I also had an opportunity to visit and sit in on a fifth-year English university lecture ... and the young students were 22, 23 years old. I introduced myself, and I said this was the first time I'd been back in nine years, and how I see that there's still no potable water and no national electrical grid, that the electricity is still going off at any time of night or day, for hours. And I said, "You were only 12 or 13 years old when the war broke out. ... I'd like to hear from you." And there was complete silence.

And then after a while, a young woman trusted herself to speak, and she said, "It's not about water or electricity. You have destroyed everything. You have destroyed our country. You have destroyed our ancient civilization. You have destroyed what is inside of us. You have taken our smiles from us. You have taken our dreams."

Another said, "You don't destroy everything and then say, 'We're sorry.' You don't commit crimes and then say, 'Sorry.' No, it will not be forgotten. It is not written on our hearts, it is carved on our hearts."

I asked a 23-year-old graduate in English how the war has affected her country, and this is what she told me: "Things have gotten worse. Children 8 and 10 years old think of weapons and killing. They do not have the thoughts of children. ... I have never felt safe since the war. We have forgotten the real meaning of safety. ... Iraqi people are very kind, but after the war, many changes happened in the psyche." She wants to be a teacher, and she said that an exodus of the professional class has left a big effect on her generation.

What is Iraq like today?
If I had three words to describe Baghdad, it would be checkpoints, cement barricades and traffic jams. I'm not a fearful person by nature, but I, in this trip last May, I felt fear in Baghdad. Explosions jarred me upright at night, close by, they sounded like 20 yards away. We had to check for sticky bombs under the car, we had to try and get around fake checkpoints, we saw billowing smoke of car bombs on the highways, we got a lot of information of people being killed, family members being killed, people kidnapped, people killed at markets. This is the tragic thing, that people are being killed at markets, at restaurants, at soccer games, in buses.

How do you stay in contact with Iraqis when you are in the States?
We send emails and letters. Let me read you some correspondences I received in the past two days:

"The situation is terrible. Since weeks we are very tired from guarding ourselves in our village. Six people were killed as a reaction of a car bomb, and two of the victims was my cousin and his wife. They were going for shopping with the kids, and the militia killed the parents in front of the kids inside the car."

"All my kids are now very afraid. In the night when they are sleeping they just wake up screaming and hug me. They start to see bad dreams, and every morning my little daughters ask me, 'Please don't die.' "

"Now we are hearing many threats from the Shia, that if America attacks Syria, or if the Syrian regime will topple, the Sunni people in Baghdad, especially on the east bank of the Tigris River, will be killed. "

"Death covers Baghdad today. I heard five huge explosions."

"Baghdad is a dead zone now."

How do Iraqis feel about the situation in Syria?
Certainly, people feel that the violence in Syria is affecting the violence in Iraq. Did you know that Syria never closed its doors to Iraqi refugees? It's the only country that never did.

You are Catholic. What is it like to have so many Muslim friends?
I've always felt, always in the Middle East, that it's so freeing to be in the Middle East because you can talk

about God all the time. People live their religion, whether Christian or Muslim. They are who they are because of their faith, it's what gets them through. There's just such a deep sense of sharing.

Going there ... we're able to embrace one another, so to speak, and there's no government that can tell us we can't do that, that we're not brothers and sisters. That's what the message is.

[Megan Fincher is an *NCR* Bertelsen intern. Her email address is mfincher@ncronline.org [1].]

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