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Sept. 11th families support Iraqi group teaching nonviolence

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

"Wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows," Martin Luther King, Jr. once said. In the days after September 11, 2001, some of the relatives of those who died in the attacks took King's words to heart. They formed "September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows," an organization to promote peace and nonviolence instead of revenge and retaliation. Since then, they've traveled the world to stand with victims of U.S. terrorism.

One of them, Terry Rockefeller, just returned from Iraq where she attended the first national meeting of a new network of creative nonviolence. Her report offers good news of peace and hope in a dark time.

I recently spoke with Terry from her home in Boston. Terry lost her sister Laura on September 11th. Laura was an actress who had a part-time day job. That morning, she was running a seminar on "information technologies" at a breakfast meeting on the top of the World Trade Center.

For six months Terry grieved, then joined September 11th Families. [See: www.peacefultomorrows.org.] In 2003, she went to Iraq with my friend Colleen Kelly, who had lost her brother in the towers. Since then, Terry has spoken out, marched, and organized events, doing everything she can to help end the U.S. war and occupation of Iraq.

But Terry wanted more. She was interested not just in ending war, but promoting peace. Recently she learned about a network of peace activists in Iraq who have formed a national organization to promote

nonviolence. These Iraqis call their group, "LaOnf," an Arabic word that means "no violence" [See: www.laonf.net]. So with Adele Welty, another member of Peaceful Tomorrows, Terry flew to Iraq in August to attend the first national meeting of LaOnf.

LaOnf had its start at the 2005 World Social Forum when an Iraqi activist met other Iraqis and posed the question: "Can nonviolence be a tool for change in the midst of occupation, violence and suffering?" They were interested in using the techniques of Gandhi and King within Iraq with their own people.

The LaOnf movement began in Baghdad in 2006, with their first nonviolence training. In 2007, they spread out to seven states with regional meetings, trainings and public actions. For example, they displayed posters with the words "No to Violence!" throughout Baghdad -- in police stations, Iraqi and U.S. army bases, shops and mosques. Emboldened by their action, the activists went further, and organized their first national week of nonviolence.

In one beautiful, life-saving gesture, they gave away soccer balls to children who turned in their toy guns. U.S. soldiers have fired on and killed many children who at a distance with their toys appear armed.

By 2007, they were receiving so many applications for nonviolence training that they started to train trainers, who would then fan out to teach nonviolence to groups all over Iraq. LaOnf now operates in all of Iraq's 18 governorates. Nearly 200 organizations have joined LaOnf so far.

Of course, it's dangerous to promote nonviolence in Iraq. If you speak of resistance, you are accused of supporting terrorists and advocating violence; but if you speak about nonviolence, you are accused of supporting the unjust U.S. military occupation. LaOnf is trying to promote a "third way," to use nonviolence to resist occupation, terrorism and corruption to build a new nonviolent culture of peace.

Terry attended the first national meeting of LaOnf coordinators, in Erbil, Iraq, during the last week of August. They reported on their local work and spent most of their time planning their third national week of nonviolence, set to begin Oct. 10. This year's week will focus on promoting nonviolence around future Iraqi elections.

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During the session, Terry apologized to the Iraqis for the U.S. government's war and occupation, and told them that many Americans were doing what they could to stop the U.S. war. For most, Terry and Adele were the first Americans they ever met. By the end of the intense meetings, they had begun to relax and befriend the Americans. Terry was pressed by one coordinator, in particular, to see if Terry knew that there was a tradition of creative nonviolence within Islam itself.

"I felt so privileged to have been welcomed by these people who could have hated me," Terry told me. "They are doing the work of Peaceful Tomorrows but under much more difficult circumstances. They have many more reasons to give up, but they keep at it. I was so inspired. It was a gift to be there."

"We Americans are so undereducated and misinformed about the nature of most Iraqi people," she continued. "We are misguided by the media to see all Iraqis as violent, as people who can't run their own country. I think we need to understand the extraordinary quality of the people of Iraq, exemplified by the members of LaOnf."

"It is such an injustice to militarize their society," Terry said. "We need to end the tragic presence of the

U.S. military personnel in Iraq, to respect the quality of the people and to support their vision of what they want their life to be like. They have an historical memory, about being the crossroads of civilization. They have a far richer vision of peace than anything we Americans could ever offer them, because they have a deep commitment to their tradition, their history. I am no longer discouraged after meeting these Iraqis and seeing what they are doing. They are working for a new culture of peace; we have to do the same.?

The development of LaOnf and promotion of nonviolence by Iraqis within Iraq is a great sign of hope that deserves all our support and blessings. For information about LaOnf, visit their Web site at:

www.laonf.net.

John Dear's autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, (Loyola Press, 440 pages, with a foreword by Martin Sheen), is now available from **www.amazon.com**. See **www.persistentpeace.com**. This week, he starts on a ten week national book tour across the country to speak about peace, nonviolence and Jesus. For schedule details, see: **www.johndear.org**.

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