

Iraq: Faces and Stories

In their most recent statement on Iraq, the U.S. bishops pointed to the human face of war: “We remain concerned for the safety of the men and women who serve generously in the U.S. military. We are grateful for their heroic sacrifices . . . We are deeply concerned for the lives and dignity of the Iraqi people who are also our sisters and brothers and deserve our care and solidarity.”¹ In contrast to the generalizing statistics that are readily available about the casualties of war, the bishops, in their statement, pointed to the “daily struggles” of individuals and families who are impacted by the ongoing war and its effects.

Just war theory, discussed in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, also brings special emphasis to the human face of war, asserting that, in the midst of war, there is a “duty to protect and help innocent victims who are not able to defend themselves from acts of aggression.” The *Compendium* states that civilians must never become targets of war, that a high level of humanitarian aid should be made available to them, and that, in essence, “the good of the human person must take precedence over the interests of the parties to the conflict.”²

It is this focus on the dignity of each and every human person and CST’s call to solidarity with them that this resource brings to light. This resource is intended to be an aid for reflection on the question, “Who are the faces behind the statistics?” The following pages include the “faces and stories” of eight persons, from eight different walks of life, who have been affected by the Iraq war. These case studies can be used in a variety of ways, listed on pages 1 and 2, to encourage reflection on and solidarity with the real people affected.

Activity 1

Use the faces and stories on the following pages as part of an eight-day prayer experience. Each day, choose one face and story with which to pray. Use the following process for guidance:

1. *Read.* Read the person’s story thoughtfully and reflectively.
2. *Experience.* Now focus on the face(s) associated with the story. Imagine how it would feel to experience each event in the person’s story. Try to really put yourself in her or his place.
3. *Pray.* Take a moment to compose, in a prayer journal or in your mind, a special prayer for this person/family, and for all the other people and families who are experiencing similar circumstances. You might want to pray for healing, strength, God’s presence, or action by those in power to resolve the issues that caused their situation.

Activity 2

Use the faces and stories on the following pages as a starting point to research the stories of others who have been impacted in similar ways by the war in Iraq. Using the internet, periodicals, etc., try to find at least two other examples of people in similar situations. Then answer the following questions:

1. What is similar about their experiences? What is different?
2. What further insights about the struggles of these people can be added by the additional examples?
3. Imagine that the people in all three of the examples were to meet. What do you think they would say to one another?

¹ Bishop William Skylstad, President of USCCB, “Call for Dialogue and Action on Responsible Transition in Iraq (Nov. 13, 2006).

² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Dec. 2004), no. 504.



Activity 3

Use the faces and stories on the following pages as starting points to find out more about the circumstances and conditions facing them and people like them. Identify the face/story about which you have thought or reflected the *least*. Then use the internet, periodicals, and other sources to find out whatever facts can be uncovered about each group represented, using the following guide:

U.S. soldiers

- How many have been injured? Killed?
- What injuries are the most common?
- What memories do Iraq veterans carry with them back to the U.S.?
- What percentage struggle with various mental problems (like PTSD, depression, etc.) after returning to the U.S.?
- Are soldiers well-cared for once they return to the U.S.?
- How are relationships with family and friends affected by their experiences in Iraq?

Families of soldiers

- How many children have experienced the loss of a parent in Iraq? Spouses?
- What programs are in place to help families deal with financial burdens after the death of a loved one in Iraq? What criticisms or complaints have family members made about the system currently in place?
- Are services available to help family members deal with grief? Are there complaints/criticisms of what is offered?
- What statements can you find that have been made by families of soldiers who died in Iraq?

Iraqis (parents/children/refugee)

- Which areas in Iraq have seen the most fighting? Of major violent incidents you have read about in the last year, where have these taken place?
- How many Iraqis have died as a result of the war? Can you find any information about the demographics of those dying? (Are they adults, children, men or women, of which religions, etc.?)
- How many Iraqis have become refugees? Where do they go?

- What do Iraqi refugees face once they leave?
- What obstacles might families who want to escape face?
- If an innocent civilian loses a limb due to fighting, are any special services available to help him or her?

Humanitarian workers and doctors

- How has infrastructure changed in Iraq since the war began?
- How do hospitals, electricity, etc. compare to how they were before the war?
- What humanitarian organizations are still working in Iraq? Which have left?
- List some of the kidnappings of humanitarian workers that have been in the news since the start of the war. What have those kidnapped experienced?
- Do doctors and aid workers find themselves caught up in the sectarian violence? What difficulties do they face in distancing themselves from sectarianism?
- What might humanitarian workers and doctors be afraid of if they remain in Iraq? Why might they not want to leave?

Discussion Questions

1. How do the above activities reveal the human faces of war?
2. How has your view expanded in terms of who is affected by the Iraq war? How does war affect diverse types of people in different situations?
3. What similarities can you identify in the experiences of the different “faces” featured in this resource? What differences?
4. What is the relationship between war and human dignity?
5. How did engaging in the activities help you to practice solidarity with those who suffer as a result of war?
6. What further learning or actions do you feel called to engage in after learning about the people in this resource and those like them?



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Richard Twohig, Iraq Veteran

In May 2003, Richard Twohig was thrown from a moving vehicle in Baghdad. Although he is lucky to have kept all of his limbs, unlike many other soldiers, he has suffered from powerful migraines and other debilitating internal conditions ever since. In 2007, he told the *Washington Post*, “Before, I would pass out in the shower, things like that. You kind of learn when they’re coming on. So when I feel lightheaded and my legs get weak, I crouch down.” Now he takes strong drugs for the pain, but still experiences a continual throbbing and gets the severest headaches about once a week. Unable to work, he stays at home to care for his children.

At twenty-five years old, in addition to the headaches, Richard often forgets information he has been told only moments before, he has trouble concentrating, his ears constantly ring, he has no appetite, he automatically plans escape routes when in public places, and he feels lethargic. “What can I actually do?” he asks, when considering future employment prospects. “Physical work gives me migraines. I vomit all the time . . . I’m on morphine; I’m addicted. I’m just a mess.” But like the great majority of injured veterans coming home from Iraq, the Army Physical Evaluation Board has ruled that Richard is not disabled enough to qualify for military retirement benefits, which awards benefits only to those who they deem are more than 30 percent disabled. Richard and his family are battling the decision in court. Richard comes from a military family, with his parents both having served, and his brother currently a marine. But his experience has made him think twice about his decision to join the military: “They don’t really care about soldiers. They got their mission, and if you’re hurt, oh, well,” he says. “After we’re no good to them, they just get rid of us.”¹



Eric, Iraq Veteran

“We did a convey to go and give the guards what they needed – like food, water, ammo, whatever they needed. One of our trucks, the trailer on it had 3 flat tires so me and my corporeal went and started doing the tires and while we were doing the tires, most of the convey left. . . While they were gone, they shut down all of Fallujah. . . so we were stuck there and . . . somebody found our position right away. We started getting mortared and everything, so from an hour of us being there, it turned into hell, and 3 maybe 4 hours later someone said, ‘Hey lets get out of here.’ We moved from there, we went and set up a position. . . we were stuck there for 13 days—12 days. Day and night, gunfire, mortar attacks, RPGs, whatever else they could find to shoot us. They had snipers out there, so basically we were just stuck, in a hole with 3 other guys. It got real personal with everybody, praying, all the emotions came out, praying to see our families, which is probably one of the biggest reasons I have problems talking to my family now, because you talk to your family, think of your family and you think of those days and just get flashbacks.



“So whenever I think of my family now it goes back to those times. You can’t move. Your hands sweat a lot. You feel like you’re going to die because your heart’s racing so fast. Your chest heats up because there’s a lot of pressure. . . After everything that happened in Iraq, I feel if I get into a fight I’ll probably kill somebody instead of hurting them. One of the things I missed most in Iraq was family and friends. Every day you look forward to coming back to your family. But then you get back to your family and it’s not the same. They try understanding what you saw, what you did; they ask questions all the time. It’s not so much you don’t want to tell them, it’s more pointless because they’re not going to understand, one, and two, it just stirs memories back up.”²

¹ Span, Paula. “Battle Worn,” *Washington Post* (Feb. 15, 2007), p. W10.

² “Why It’s So Difficult Coming Back to Family,” Video interview by PBS at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/view/special.html> (Nov. 2004).

Kawkab Barakat, Iraqi Mother

“I lost my only two sons in the explosion [on December 12, 2006 in Baghdad]. I cannot control the pain. Now I understand what every Iraqi mother who lost their sons feels. They were trying to work to bring food and pay our rent, which is three months late.

“My sons were very good people. They were responsible and worked hard to support us. They had many proposals to work with U.S. engineers but refused many times [for fear of being seen as traitors]. But it wasn’t enough and those bastards killed them anyway.

“I saw the body of one of my dead sons, but for the other they brought me his shoes saying that they could only find pieces of him. What did I do to deserve this? I am a mother and even a decent burial is not possible because my son was blown apart. Allahu akbar [God is great]!

“We are a poor family and the only income for me and my three daughters was that which my sons were bringing to us each day. Their wives and children live with me too. Now we are afraid because we don’t know how we are going to feed the children tomorrow. We [the women] have never worked outside. Maybe the only solution is to go in the streets and beg for help.”¹



Fatah Barakat, Iraqi Child

Fatah is 10 years old. He lost his leg when he was caught in the crossfire when U.S.-led forces were fighting Iraqi militia fighters in Sadr City, a suburb of Baghdad where he and his family live. He says:

“Since I lost one of my legs, I like to make sure that the other one is still here. My mother tells me that I have to stop doing this. But it is hard for me, knowing that I will never be able to play like other children and play football as I used to do every day. . . . Once, I was out in shorts and my friends started to laugh at me saying that I was a useless boy and could only play dominos.”

Since the accident, Fatah’s mother has been requesting help from NGOs and the government, but to no avail: “When I ask NGOs or the government for a wheelchair for my child, or to pay for surgery or even an artificial leg, they just answer me by saying that people are dying every day and others getting displaced and they don’t have time to worry about just one child,” she says.

She continues: “The problem is that hundreds of children are suffering in Iraq with the same problem but are not getting help from anyone. They have been put aside until the violence has been controlled and the displaced return to their homes. But until that happens, they may die or they could be seriously affected psychologically.”²

¹Kawkab Barakat, Iraq “I lost my only two sons in the explosion,” <http://www.irinnews.org/HOVRReport.aspx?ReportId=62517> (Dec. 13, 2006).

²“IRAQ: Children living without limbs lack aid,” IRIN News, <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=69915> (Feb. 4, 2007).

The Shanabergers, Family of a U.S. Soldier Killed in Iraq

When Corey Shanaberger's oldest son, Jesse, 13, saw the uniformed men standing outside his house, he knew that something had happened to his dad. "He let out an agony type of scream. I still remember it very vividly," Corey says. After breaking the news to her other children, Audrey, 4, and twins Jack, and Grace, 3, Audrey immediately began to cry. Jack kept repeating, "No, they're going to let him off the plane. They're going to let him off the plane!"



Her husband, Baron, had requested that, if he died in Iraq, the children would be allowed to see his coffin. Each brought something different to place in the coffin: Jesse, a picture, Audrey, a stuffed puppy dog, Jack, a truck, and Grace, her favorite doll. The activity helped bring closure, but the memories in daily life were still difficult. Audrey would become angry when she saw soldiers in uniform and Jesse began to ask, "Why do they get to come home?" Grace began to talk about hating her daddy because he won't be coming home, and Jack started asking, "Why can't we get a doctor to fix daddy?"

Eventually, Corey decided to move the family to Melbourne, Australia, to be closer to her family. But even though time is passing, Corey is having a difficult time and so are her children: "Everyone tells you it will get easier," Corey says. "Each day I feel a little worse."¹



The Abdel Salams, Iraqi Refugee Family

Ahmed, an Iraqi doctor, describes his family's escape from Baghdad to Jordan after a violent attack on his wife, Mayyada, a pharmacist:

"One of the radical Muslims came into the pharmacy and asked Mayyada why she was unveiled. She explained she was not Muslim and that there was no hijab in her religion. He told her she was an infidel and that she should leave Iraq."

Days later, the family was in the pharmacy when Mayyada was targeted in a drive-by shooting:

"I, my wife and children were in the pharmacy when the attack happened. They shot several rounds, smashing the shop window and the shelves of drugs. We were terrified. My wife was injured in the leg, but only superficially," Ahmed explains.

But the family was terrified and decided to move to Jordan, where they no longer fear death, but life is still very difficult. "We arrived as refugees; we have no rights. We can't work and we can't send the children to school. We have three daughters, aged six, three and one. We are considered illegal residents in Amman, although we are refugees," Ahmed says. He does not think their life savings will last more than another five months, and he worries about his parents, who are still living in Baghdad. "We speak to them on the phone, we are very anxious about them because it is so dangerous."²

¹ Hoffman, Lisa and Annette Rainville. "Children of the Fallen," Scripts Howard News Service (Dec. 15, 2004), <http://www.shns.com/shns/warkids/>.

² "Iraqi Voices: Escaping Abroad," BBC News (Jan. 9, 2007), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/talking_point/6176457.stm.

Ghada Al Daheen, Iraqi Doctor

Dr. Ghada Al Daheen, from the northern city of Mosul, in Iraq, spoke in an interview with BBC News about the disappointment, fear, and frustration that characterizes the daily lives of doctors in Iraq:



"After the war we expected the sun to shine, but things worsened. It was really risky to go out of the home - we had to plan even to go to work. Kidnaps were frequent and increasing and it was a real risk to live there, but I think things might be becoming calmer. I am a target because I am a doctor. The fashion of kidnapping there is to go for people with brain-power and money.

"We are short of a lot of things. Everything there is at the minimum. We are performing well despite the limitations. We sometimes get very very embarrassed because things are not there. A man died from a cobra bite because the antidote was not there.

"Our baby care units are very limited and if we manage to resuscitate the baby, we cannot keep them alive. The hospital surgical instruments are insufficient and we need more ultrasounds and foetal monitoring - every thing is very limited. . . I think our service staff, nurses and midwives need a lot of training. We wish it would come, we are hoping that it will. But we have waited too long and I feel fed up and tired saying 'I hope'!"¹



Marla Ruzicka, Humanitarian Worker

After the start of the Iraq war, Marla Ruzicka created her own charity, Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVC), to help individuals attain compensation for the deaths of civilian family members due to the war. In an interview with CNN, Marla discussed her work:

"[Our work is] not at all impossible or hard to do. . . We did go door to door. We had doctors, nurses, who worked in the hospitals, who knew the casualties and who knew where they were living and we went and interviewed them and their dependents. We got their death certificates, so we sort of

recreated their lives and their incidences, and now with the new incidences we rely on Iraqi police records. . . My number one responsibility is to help the families that get hurt and I want to help the U.S. military do a better job so we can prevent loss of innocent life. . . I meet with them every day; I'm emailing them about every hour to say, 'Listen can you please help this little girl, Aya, can you look at this case, how can we get compensation for this family?' . . . Also, when we have to talk about things like cluster bombs and unexploded ordinances. . . I go to them with this information and try to get these cleaned up as soon as possible.

"I'm very frustrated also; we've been working on some cases for 3 months, and each time we go back to the U.S. military we have to have different types of documentation. It's kind of 'This person get's help and this person doesn't.' It's not really clear to Iraqis and its very frustrating. We documented over 2,000 names of people that were killed that was incomplete because we weren't able to cover all of Baghdad. . . over 2,000 innocent families... we just wanted to help as many people as possible."

Marla, 28, died April 16, 2005, when a car bomb exploded near a busy road near Baghdad airport. She was on her way back from talking to bereaved families.

¹ Elliot, Jane. "Iraqi doctors battle shortages and fears," BCC News (Feb. 14, 2005), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4252639.stm>.

² <http://marlaruzicka.blogspot.com/2005/04/marlas-work-in-context.html>

