

Iraq: Forgiving the Unforgiven

By Marie Braun

For the past 12 years, Marie Braun has organized speaking tours for Sami Rasouli whenever he visited Minnesota from his home in Iraq. She and her husband John frequently traveled with him. This article reflects some of the remarks that Sami shared with audiences on his most recent tour in August of 2016.

When the Dominican Sisters of Racine, Wisconsin, wanted a keynote speaker to address the subject of forgiveness at a recent retreat, they did not seek someone known for his/her piety. Instead, the Sisters asked that their keynote speaker be someone whose reality is solidly based in one of the greatest tragedies of the 21st century. They chose Sami Rasouli, an Iraqi-American, who had lived in the U.S. for 30 years before moving back to Iraq in 2004.

On March 20, 2003, while still living in the U.S., Sami sobbed as his adopted country started bombing his country of origin. And he continued to grieve as the invasion was followed by a brutal occupation that lasted until 2011. [Although the occupation ended officially in that year, U.S. military involvement continues in some form to this day.]

When he visited Iraq in 2003 to commemorate the death of his mother, Sami witnessed firsthand the crumbling of the ancient cradle of civilization; the loss of basic services such as electrical power, sewage, and garbage disposal, in addition to the inability to have adequate food and clean water. Along with this came the almost total collapse of the modern Iraqi health and educational systems that had been some of the most advanced in the Middle East. In describing Iraq at that time, many employed the metaphor of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—death, famine, disease, and war—galloping through the land.

In speaking of his personal journey, Sami said that in 1976, Iraq's former president, Saddam Hussein, addressed Iraqis saying, "If you are not with me, you are against me." So Sami left his country at the age of 24, eventually ending up in the United States. Following 9/11, the democratically elected President George Bush addressed the citizens of the U.S. and the whole world announcing, "If you are not with me, you are against me." So, Sami, in November of 2004, left the U.S. and went back to live in Iraq.

At the time, Sami made a commitment to stay in Iraq for five years and do whatever he could to bring reconciliation between his country of origin and his adopted country. He also made a commitment to come back to Minnesota each year to give a firsthand account of what was happening in Iraq. And return he did, year after year, to give eyewitness reports about the war and occupation.

In the early years, Sami spoke of the terrible pain and destruction that the war brought, but his reports were also laced with hope. Today he sees little hope for Iraq and its people in the foreseeable future, at least not until the U.S. leaves the Middle East, which he does not expect to happen soon. When the Bush Administration bombed Iraq in 2003, Saddam Hussein was in power; today ISIS is there. He wonders if U.S. citizens believe these wars, which could cost up to \$6 trillion, were worth it. And he wonders why Iraqi people had to pay the price for the voracious appetite of the U.S. for oil and the desire to control the flow of oil in the Middle East.



Najaf, where Sami lives, is in an area that has not been overrun by ISIS. But it is the city where the dead are brought from the nine southern provinces of Iraq to the hallowed Wadei As-Salaam [Valley of Peace] Cemetery, the 1,400-year-old Shiite burial ground. Sami says that each day the bodies of 100-150 Iraqi youth arrive there in body bags. They are killed fighting foreign armies bent on conquering Iraq. The apocalyptic horsemen continue to gallop across Iraq! These days some of the fighters have different names and different methods, but they perform the same function—conquering and dividing Iraq.

Sami reports that there are four million internally displaced people in Iraq; Najaf is host to half a million of them. Many had left their homes in other parts of Iraq when bands of ISIS entered their village or city. ISIS soldiers frequently meted out such horrific brutality that the inhabitants of other villages or cities, terrified that the same thing would happen to them, would abandon their homes and flee for their lives. Others fled when their villages or cities were shelled or bombed by Western and Iraqi-government forces in efforts to retake their villages or cities.

Iraq's borders have been very porous since the U.S. invasion of 2003, when the army, police, and border guards were all "let go" as part of the purge of members of the Ba'ath party by U.S. Civil Administrator Paul Bremer. Sami said it is still very

easy for anyone to enter or leave the country – criminals, contractors, mercenaries, foreign military, and others. And, while ordinary Iraqis have inadequate services and cannot easily move about, weapons, food, and water continue to be supplied to ISIS, a creation of the U.S. and Israel, whose propagandists are so unfamiliar with the language of the land that they often speak broken Arabic.

The questions many Iraqis ask include “Who are these people? Where do they come from? Who finances them? Who benefits when Arab nations are split into smaller entities?” And “Who are the professionals who run the 11 oil wells that are under the control of ISIS?”

Coming from a country forced to live with such catastrophic tragedy from the U.S. war to the present, Sami was yet able to share with his audiences what he, growing up as a Muslim, had been taught about forgiveness. Perhaps he was able to do so because, as an adult, it was necessary to contemplate the subject out of the depth of his experience.

To illustrate his thoughts, he related an anecdote. He had recently received a letter from an American veteran, who was struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the unforgiveable war on Iraq. It read: “I was asked by my government to fight for our way of life and freedom in Iraq. I was given an assault rifle that was designed to fire 20 bullets every 3 seconds, 400 bullets per minute, with a large clip designed to kill as many of the enemy as possible in the shortest period of time. Like many of my fellow veterans with whom I served in Iraq, I am haunted by what was done, and is still being done, to the Iraqi people because of our invasion of your country in 2003. Please help me out. Can I be forgiven?”

Sami said that he was being asked as an Iraqi: “Can this man be forgiven when over one million of my fellow Iraqis died as a result of this American war in which he was fighting as a soldier? Can anyone who participated be forgiven?”

It is not easy for Iraqis to forgive, Sami said, because of the anger and bitterness they naturally feel about what has happened to their country. Forgiveness requires courage, strength, and awakening. It takes a very long time and immense internal struggle to heal and to learn and practice the true principles of forgiveness.

Sami went on to say that while the annual Islamic observance of Ramadan means different things for many Muslims, they all take note that the 30 days of fasting is generally a time for mindfulness; a time to focus inward and look at what it means to feed oneself spiritually rather than physically. This focus on mindfulness helps lead one to understand the importance of giving and forgiving.

Furthermore, Islam as a faith means submission. Being a Muslim means submitting, physically and spiritually, to the Almighty. Muslims meet Salaam (Peace) five times a day. They kneel down twice at each prayer time. At the first, they say: “I am from earth,” and at the second: “And to earth I shall return.” Bowing down on the earth, or

the clay stone which the Shi'a carry, "reminds us that we are nothing but dust and helps us to feel modest and humble. It awakens in us the ability to see that we are all one humanity, to feel empathy for our fellow human beings, to realize that all human beings are potentially capable of making terrible mistakes, and to understand the necessity of adopting forgiveness as a way of life."

Sami feels honored to be part of the Islamic culture where he learned about "unity," and the Christian culture where he learned "unconditional love," both of which have guided him to forgiveness. He learned that "to forgive is to set the prisoner free, and to realize that the prisoner was me!"

So Sami wrote his American friend, the Iraq veteran, assuring him that he, too, is forgiven.

Sami Rasouli is founder of Muslim Peacemaker Teams (MPT) in Iraq which are modeled after the Christian Peacemaker Teams that he met there. MPT engages in projects to promote peace and reconciliation between Iraq and the U.S. Marie Braun is a leader in the Twin Cities peace community which has opposed war on Iraq and all other wars.