

## Seven Years and Still Counting: Iraq

by Marie Braun



Young woman by an Iraqi woman artist. She is portrayed with lips sewn shut, traumatized and unable to speak as a consequence of war.

To many people, issues regarding Iraq are old news. There is a presumed timeline for withdrawing troops. And there are new issues to consider the U.S. domestic economic crisis and the U.S./NATO war and occupation of Afghanistan.

However, this year marks the seventh anniversary of the occupation of Iraq. It is imperative that we protest the expansion of the war and occupation in Afghanistan as U.S./NATO forces invade the major city of Kandahar, but is it also very important that we not forget Iraq. My friend Kathy Kelly says, "If you want to stop the next war, tell the truth about this war." The truth is that the invasion of Iraq was one of the greatest crimes of the last several decades. This was an illegal war, in blatant violation of international law. It was an aggressive war launched under false pretenses. It destroyed an entire country, and devastated the population.

And today, after seven years under U.S. occupation, Iraqis are still without sufficient clean water, electricity, education, or health care. Tens of thousands of Iraqis are disabled, physically or mentally. There are over two million refugees outside Iraq and more displaced refugees inside Iraq; there are three million widows and five million orphans. Fifty percent of Iraqis are unemployed. Children continue to drink contaminated water, and large numbers of Iraqi women are afraid to get pregnant because so many babies are born with severe deformities.

Twelve thousand physicians and thousands of intellectuals and engineers... a large percentage of the professionals in Iraq... were assassinated, died as a result of war, or were forced to flee the country with their lives. These are the people who would have been able to maintain hospitals, schools, and universities and to repair roads, bridges, electrical plants, and water-treatment facilities. Hence, the country lost much of its capacity to rebuild, and although \$53 billion was spent (or should we say

squandered) on so-called “reconstruction” in Iraq, the U.S. occupation never managed to deliver electricity, jobs, clean water, or health care to the people.

If anything is going to improve in Iraq, we must end this military occupation now and give the Iraqis a chance to rebuild their own country. The troops must be brought home and the tanks and weapons replaced with skilled professionals and resources under the direction of Iraqi leadership.

And let us not be misled by Dick Cheney, Karl Rove, and others who are again back on the talk shows saying the invasion of Iraq was “the right thing to do” or those who would prolong the occupation to, in their words, “deter a return to civil war and help Iraq move forward politically.” The U.S. military presence in Iraq has always been about expanding U.S. power, not the welfare of the Iraqi people. Extending the presence of the U.S. military in Iraq will not address the divisions caused by the war and occupation, help rebuild that devastated country, or heal the wounds of war.

President Obama has promised to withdraw all combat troops from Iraq by August 31 of this year, bringing the total number of troops down to less than 50,000. He has also stated repeatedly that he will abide by the binding bilateral agreement between the two governments that requires all U.S. troops and contractors to leave Iraq by the end of 2011, without leaving any military bases behind.

While our message must be that the occupation of Iraq must end immediately, it is important to note that August 31 is not far away. We must not let those who would extend the occupation have their way. We must keep speaking truth to power. We must keep pressuring our representatives to vote to quit funding the bloody wars and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and support legislation that would withdraw troops and demand an exit strategy. And we must once again activate the silent majority and come out into the streets in such large numbers that our government cannot ignore us. The time to mobilize is now.

Marie Braun continues to work with the Twin Cities Peace Campaign, which she co-founded after traveling to Iraq during the sanctions period. She is a dedicated activist, also working with Women Against Military Madness, Alliant Action, and Iraq Peace Action Coalition. Marie helped organize the Minnesota delegation of the Peaceable Assembly Campaign in Washington, D.C., last January and antiwar demonstrations at both Minnesota senators’ offices this spring, in protest of U.S. funding of wars and occupations.