

Iraqi Civil Society and US Military Veterans Launch People's Hearing on Occupation's Ongoing Toxic Legacy

#RightToHeal: 11 Years After US Invasion, Bearing Witness to Iraq War's Lasting Harm

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Global Research, March 31, 2014

[Common Dreams](#) 27 March 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Eleven years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the war has largely disappeared from the corporate media, and President Obama recently took the widely-criticized step of [defending](#) the invasion and claiming the Iraqi people now have “sovereignty.” Yet, on Wednesday night, Iraqi civil society organizers and U.S. military veterans gathered at a “People’s Hearing” in Washington, DC to tell a different story: of a war that is not over, that is still taking life, spreading trauma, and poisoning Iraq.

In two hours of emotionally-charged testimony — curated by the [Right to Heal](#) campaign, a joint effort of Organization for Women’s Freedom in Iraq, Federation of Workers Councils and Unions of Iraq, and Iraq Veterans Against the War — the hearing traced the ongoing impacts of the U.S.-led war and occupation. This legacy includes environmental poisoning, Iraqi government repression, sectarian conflict, poverty, trauma, displacement, and death.



Yanar Mohammed, president and co-founder of the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq, testifies on toxic legacy of U.S. war on Iraq Wednesday, March 27. (Photo: Cassidy Regan)

Throughout the event, which was moderated by journalist Phil Donahue and followed an earlier briefing in the House featuring the testimony of witnesses, an overwhelming call emerged. The U.S. must give reparations to the Iraqi people, clean up its toxic legacy, and stop waging wars and occupations around the world.

“Relations based on militarism need to be changed,” said Yanar Mohammed, president and co-founder of the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq. “The change can come from places like this.”

Toxic Legacy

Speakers described a country poisoned for decades by the U.S. military — from [depleted uranium](#) used in the 1991 Gulf War and recent Iraq War, chemical weapon [white phosphorous](#) used in the 2004 U.S. attack on Fallujah, and burn pits — which are run by the U.S. military and private contractors and burn munitions, chemicals, rubbers, plastics, and a host of other substances often within close proximity of Iraqi civilians. The toxic legacy in Iraq was repeatedly compared to the U.S. nuclear legacy in Japan and Agent Orange attacks

in Vietnam.



Falah Alwan, President of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (Photo: Cara Solomon)

Mozhgan Savabieasfahani, an environmental toxicologist, testified that U.S. burn pits in Iraq are exposing the Iraqi public to a litany of dangerous compounds, including lead and mercury. Research teams sent to Iraqi hospitals in Basra and Falluja found abnormally high rates of cancer, birth defects, and heart defects, she stated.

Kristi Casteel, mother of IVAW member [Joshua Casteel](#), explained that her son passed away August 25, 2012 due to what she believes were complications from cancer caused by exposure to burn pits in Abu Ghraib during his Army service. “Had we known he was at risk from toxins in Iraq, he might have been saved,” said Kristi, adding that the military was “allowing more harm to our soldiers than our supposed enemies were inflicting.” Joshua became a conscientious objector, writer, and anti-war activist. According to his mother, his dying wish was that burn pits be eradicated and those exposed to these pits, especially Iraqis, receive care.

Mohammed, who fled Iraq during the first Gulf war but then returned after 2003 to “help people,” described epidemics of birth defects in cities and towns across Iraq. “There are some mothers who have three or four children who don’t have limbs that work, who are totally paralyzed, their fingers fused to each other. These children have mental disabilities,” she said. “There needs to be reparations for families facing birth defect and areas that have been contaminated. There needs to be cleanup.”

U.S.-Backed Repression

Speakers testified that the U.S. has also left behind another poison — the Nouri al-Maliki regime that is stoking sectarian conflict and repressing protesters and organizers fighting for their rights — against the backdrop of health problems, trauma, and a climbing refugee crisis.

“We will not surrender to sadness. We will not surrender to subjugation. We will have our say.” —Yanar Mohammed, Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq

According to Falah Alwan, President of the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq, the Iraqi government has carried forward old laws from Saddam Hussein that repress and punish workers for organizing in their workplaces. “The new government is busy with how to re-divide the wealthy and seize the resources of society,” he said. “They are supported directly by the U.S. government. They want to issue new labor laws to control the workers and restrain them from stating their demands.”

Mohammed slammed the “corrupt” U.S.-backed and armed Iraqi government and scoffed at Obama’s claims about Iraqi sovereignty. “The U.S. occupation taught us how to hate each other based on sectarian divides,” she said. “The U.S. occupation has alienated the women of Iraq and the ethnicities of Iraq.”

The Traumas That Spread

“The truth is that war is a devastating thing,” said Savabieasfahani. “And if we unleash it on innocent populations, it will harm us all.”

One by one, Iraq veterans took to the podium to testify to the wounds they still carry and the U.S. military’s refusal to account for the harm done. IVAW member Rebekah Lampman described the harrowing experience of being raped by a fellow soldier and being denied recourse for winning justice and accountability. In fact, she was blamed for her own assault, she stated. Reflecting on her own healing process following her military discharge, she said, “I’m not a victim. I’m a survivor.”



Former marine and IVAW member Ramon Mejia (Photo: Cassidy Regan)

Former marine and IVAW member Ramon Mejia, who said he joined the military out of the “economic necessity” of providing for his family, explained that he was taught to dehumanize Iraqi people. When he made the decision, while deployed, to start “really seeing” Iraqi people after an experience hearing the call to prayer, he says everything shifted. “My war had changed: I went from going through the motions to questioning,” he said.

After his discharge, Ramon faced seizures and mental health problems, and at one point had suicidal ideations. He declared, “I wish I could express to you how sorry I am for what happened in Iraq, and I’m dedicating my life to making things right.”

Savabieasfahani pointed out that “very little work has been done on the mental effects of this war” on the Iraqi population. “Imagine the kinds of mental, emotional, physical pressure on the population of Iraq,” she stated.

Said Mohammed, “You get devastated out of fear. You have no hope.”

Justice and Reparations

Speaker after speaker repeated the call for reparations and accountability for a war that, [according to some estimates](#), has killed over one million Iraqi people. Reparations include research into the toxic legacy of the U.S. war in Iraq, and a “clean-up” of these sites. While the Iraqi government is corrupt, there is a civil society that can oversee reparations and move it to the right places, urged Mohammed. Veterans repeated the “Right to Heal” call for true care for returning veterans, and Savabieasfahani also spoke about the need to combat U.S. racism against Arabs and people of color more broadly.

Yet, speakers urged that the real solution is ending the U.S.-led wars responsible for creating the trauma and devastation in the first place.

“The war brings us here today,” said Pam Spees, senior staff attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights, in an address delivered in Arabic for the Iraqi audience — including those remotely watching a live-stream of the event. “There is nothing that can compensate for the damage that this war has caused, but we are committing ourselves to seeking justice.”

“We are looking for solutions and answers for how not to let it happen again,” said Mohammed. “We will not surrender to sadness. We will not surrender to subjugation. We will

have our say.”

The full hearing is featured in the video below.

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