

An Iraqi blogger brings his message to the Islands

Writing for his country

JON LETMAN

Most people come to Hawai'i for a bit of sun and fun and to forget about home. Raed Jarrar came here to remember, and to remind.

Home for Jarrar is Baghdad, though today he lives in Washington D.C. where he is a consultant for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Nobel Prize winning organization that carries out social justice and peace programs worldwide.

Educated as an architect, Jarrar said he didn't have the privilege to pursue his chosen career.

"I didn't wake up one morning and say, 'I think I will quit architecture and fight for peace and justice,'" Jarrar said.

That decision was made for him by a bomb which fell on his neighborhood during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Last month, the AFSC arranged for Jarrar to visit Hawai'i as part of a speaking tour intended to raise awareness and dispel myths about the war and occupation. During his Hawai'i stop, Jarrar spoke at schools and campuses on O'ahu,

Hawai'i and Kaua'i.

Jarrar talked about the occupation, models for war reparations, Iraqi political history and discrepancies between how Iraqis see themselves and how they are portrayed in the U.S. media, but his main message couldn't have been simpler:

Get out of Iraq, give us our country back and leave us alone.

Pointing out that in any discussion of U.S. involvement in Iraq, the voices most notably absent are those of the very people who have suffered most under sanctions, wars and occupation—the Iraqis themselves.

Sidelined by the Bush administration, Congress, the military and others, the Iraqis are instead being used to justify the ongoing occupation by those who insist Iraq would otherwise fall apart completely.

But Jarrar reminded his audiences that three-quarters of the Iraqi public wants the U.S. out now, unequivocally, with no residual forces, no outside mercenaries (aka military contractors) and no permanent bases.

Cool but impassioned and punctuated with notes of sardonic humor, Jarrar mapped 18 years of shifting justifications for U.S. in-

terference in Iraq which, along with the American public's understanding (or lack thereof) of Iraqi history, politics, culture and society, are based on distortions, myths, quarter-truths and outright lies.

"The reasons for the conflict in Iraq are not religious or sectarian," Jarrar said. "Rather, the reason is an illegal foreign occupation that is destroying Iraq."

Just as it is ludicrous to talk in absolute terms about "The Catholics" or "The Whites" in America, so it is in Iraq, Jarrar said.

"Who are 'The Sunnis' and 'The Shiites?'" asked Jarrar. "There are some Sunnis and there are some Shi'ites, just as there are some Christians, some Yazidis and some Mandaeans."

Jarrar, whose father is Sunni and mother is Shi'ite, said there is a common mischaracterization of Muslim sects as having been at battle for thousands of years.

Speaking about the perceived differences in Iraq policy between Senators Barack Obama and John McCain, Jarrar lamented: both have basically the same plan, to withdraw some U.S. forces but leave up to 75,000 troops in Iraq indefinitely, both citing the same reasons: protect the U.S. embassy, train Iraqi



Peace activist Raed Jarrar

forces and conduct counter-terrorism measures.

Even more disturbing, Jarrar said, is that this Iraq policy is no different from the plan the Bush administration follows, just repackaged for different audiences.

"The Democratic candidates say they will start withdrawing troops a couple months after coming to power, but they never say when they will end withdrawal. There is something in the fine print that says 'but we will keep half the troops in Iraq indefinitely.'"

Jarrar cautioned his audience, "unless a candidate commits to a complete withdrawal now, they will not do anything after getting into

office." Between now and November is the time to move if there is to be a real change in U.S. policy in Iraq.

And what did Hawai'i teach Jarrar?

"Before coming, my knowledge of Hawai'i was similar to U.S. mainstream knowledge of Iraq—I got my information about Hawai'i from CNN and Fox News," he joked.

"It is amazing to see the scale of militarism in Hawai'i, Jarrar said. "Hawaiians know the meaning of foreign invasion. It's not an abstract concept, they have lived through it." ■



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