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Iraqi journalist, activist to share his perspective tonight

by Jon Letman - Special to The Garden Island

In August 2006 Raed Jarrar was at New York's JFK Airport waiting to board his JetBlue flight back to Oakland.

After several fellow passengers complained about the T-shirt he was wearing (it was black and had the script "We will not be silent" in Arabic and English), he was approached by JetBlue staff and a Transportation Security Administration inspector who told him he could not board the plane unless he changed his shirt.

He was told wearing a T-shirt with Arabic script in an airport was the equivalent of going into a bank with a shirt reading "I am a robber."

After reluctantly covering his shirt, Jarrar was allowed to board his flight but was moved from his assigned seat at the front of the plane to the back.

Shortly after the incident, Jarrar contacted the American Civil Liberties Union and filed a suit against JetBlue and the TSA inspector, alleging the incident was discrimination based on Jarrar's ethnicity — he is Iraqi.

Born in Baghdad to a Palestinian (Sunni) father and an Iraqi (Shiite) mother, Jarrar was educated as an architect and earned a graduate degree from the University of Jordan.

He was in Baghdad during the 2003 U.S. invasion and has since moved to the United States where he is a consultant for the American Friends Service Committee, a Nobel Peace Prize winning organization that carries out service, development, social justice and peace programs around the world.

Jarrar also founded a non-governmental organization called Emaar (meaning reconstruction) that conducts humanitarian work assisting internally displaced persons in Iraq.

Currently he is helping coordinate an upcoming visit by five Iraqi members of parliament to meet with members of the House Foreign Relations Subcommittee next month.

Jarrar also maintains a blog at raedinthemiddle.blogspot.com

The AFCSC arranged Jarrar's visit to Hawai'i for speaking engagements on O'ahu, Hawai'i and tonight at the Kaua'i Community College Campus Center at 7 p.m.

Jarrar's appearance is sponsored by Kaua'i Alliance for Peace and Social Justice, Associated Students of the University of Hawai'i, Hawai'i American Friends Service Committee and Kaua'i Community College.

For more information, call 645-0054, 346-7011 or 822-7646.

Q&A with Raed Jarrar

Jon Letman: What brought you to Hawai'i?

Raed Jarrar: Mainly to reach the Hawaiian public, to speak at universities and to activists who have been working on the issues of peace and justice.

JL: Have you spoken with any of Hawai'i's politicians?

RJ: No, but after my visit I will try to reach Hawai'i's representatives in Washington. During the last few days I have learned a lot about Hawaiian history. I think there are many parallels between the 2003 invasion of Iraq and how Iraqis view the occupation in a negative way and the U.S. invasion of Hawai'i in 1893 and how Hawaiians view their occupation.

I think Hawaiians know the meaning of foreign occupation. It is not an abstract concept for them, they have lived through it. Of course there are huge differences, but there are some important lessons to learn.

JL: What have your impressions been since arriving in Hawai'i?

RJ: It is amazing to see the size of militarism here, the major bases, the U.S. government interest.

JL: How do you explain the seeming lackluster opposition to the continued war and occupation in Iraq?

RJ: When we see the American public are not very much invested in pushing the government's position, it doesn't come from the fact they agree with it. It is more from a justified feeling that whatever they do, their government will ignore them. That should be dealt with and we should recognize the reasons.

JL: What are you talking about during your speaking engagements in Hawai'i?

RJ: I will be talking about strategy, ideas and facts. Local organizers and activists need to decide what are the right tools to implement these strategies.

JL: What kind of differences do you think we might see with U.S. policy in Iraq under a McCain, Obama or Clinton presidency?

RJ: Not much. They all want to leave up to 75,000 troops in Iraq indefinitely citing three reasons: to protect the U.S. embassy, to train Iraqi forces and to conduct counter-terrorism. This is actually the Bush administration's plan. In 2004 they said they want to withdraw from cities to bases. It is not a new plan and it has failed miserably.

The Democrats try to market their politics differently, saying they will start bringing troops home in two weeks or two months after coming to power, but they never say when they will end bringing troops home.

Want to Go?

Who: Raed Jarrar

Where: Kaua'i Community College Campus Center

When: Tonight, 7 p.m.

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