

# A Voice for Women and Children in War-torn Iraq

## A Ground Truth Interview with Dr. Rashad Zaydan

On March 22, we had an opportunity to interview **Dr. Rashad Zaydan**, a physician and advocate for the women and children of war-torn Iraq. She was in Washington as part of a delegation of women **CODEPINK** brought to the U.S. for International Women's Day. Shortly before she spoke at a Congressional House meeting and after several meetings with **NETWORK**, a national Catholic social justice Lobby, she met with **EPIC**. She talked with us about her efforts to help widows and orphans, while expressing hopes and fears for the future of her country.

**epic:** Tell us about your work and the organization that you founded.

**Rashad:** The Knowledge for Iraqi Women Society was founded in June of 2003. We focus mainly on women, though we also aid orphans since their numbers are increasing at a frightening pace. There are branches in central Baghdad, the city of Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, and the Dora neighborhood on the southern outskirts of Baghdad. We aim to relieve the suffering of Iraqi women by providing financial, occupational, medical, and educational resources. Throughout the country, we have 70 staff and more than 300 volunteers.

**epic:** What types of services does K4IWS offer?

**Rashad:** We offer free courses in sewing, cooking, English, Arabic, and computers, to name a few. Literacy is a priority, so we teach women how to read and write while they learn a marketable skill to earn money. For children, we offer kindergarten classes in each of our branches. Orphans attend class for free, and we engage these kids with everything from counting to computers. We also provide loans to needy families, who repay us in installments.

In each of our branches, we have a chartered clinic for women and children staffed by volunteer doctors. The services we provide include health awareness campaigns, simple check-ups, medicine distribution, and health advice. Despite all that we offer, a great deal of families with urgent medical needs are unable to reach us due to the violence and difficulties of travel in many areas of Iraq.

**epic:** We understand that your organization helped provide humanitarian assistance during the 2004 Fallujah crisis. Tell us more about that.

**Rashad:** Yes, our Fallujah branch was opened in response to the attacks. Our work there began in April 2004. Members of our society traveled to Fallujah and delivered food, clothes and blankets to suffering families. As the violence escalated, most of Fallujah's 250,000 residents were forced to evacuate. Many of them fled to camps that were set up in and around Baghdad. Our organization gave medical check-ups to people who were internally displaced, and provided them with necessities such as tents, clean water and fans.



Dr. Rashad Zaydan is pharmacist and mother of four. A native of Baghdad, she worked for Iraq's national pharmacy from 1981 until the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003. In the chaotic aftermath of the invasion, she founded the Knowledge for Iraqi Women Society (K4IWS). This non-governmental organization aids women and children in and around Baghdad and Fallujah, including families displaced by violence and military operations. For more information about K4IWS or to support their work, visit <http://almaarefa.org>.

As displaced families that we were assisting began to return home, there were growing calls for us to return with them and open a permanent branch in Fallujah. We wanted to continue serving them and their community, so we opened the doors of our Fallujah branch office on April 15, 2005. Like our other branches, we offer sewing and computer lessons in conjunction with our literacy program, and provide charity during Ramadan and other holidays. Among our most important initiatives, we started a free kindergarten class for orphans, the first kindergarten established in Fallujah following the military operation.

**epic:** What is the biggest challenge facing the children of Iraq today?

**Rashad:** Our children are suffering from the same things that we are suffering from, like water and electricity shortages,

but children are especially sensitive to fear. When American soldiers blast open the door and inspect your home, the children become so frightened. When that is repeated time and time again, the children become traumatized.

You cannot take your child to a garden or a park, because it is not secure. There are as many dangers as there are bullets in Baghdad. So you keep your children indoors. But when they are kept inside all day and night, without even electricity to watch TV or play video games, you find that they become agitated and act out against each other.

No day comes or passes without hearing an explosion or gunfire, and helicopters are always overhead. We are afraid to take our kids to school because even schools have been bombed. When we do allow our children to go to school, we worry about them, and the children themselves are constantly afraid.

In addition to their fears, Iraqi youth are also battling hopelessness. They are under a lot of stress. Many children and young people have lost their homes, their families, and the people they love. They have begun to carry weapons, fighting in one way or another. I fear for the youth of my country, and I don't want them to continue in this direction. I want them to receive an education so that they can rebuild Iraq and create a more prosperous future.

There are many things that can be said about our children, but the most important thing we must do is start to increase trust. We have to work together to find a way to stop the violence in Iraq. Right now most of the money being spent is for military operations. But if the U.S. continues these military operations, there will be more and more orphans and our problems will keep escalating. At least one fourth of the money should be spent for women and children.

**epic:** What is the status of Iraq's healthcare infrastructure?

**Rashad:** We've lost a great deal of doctors and specialists, leaving numerous hospitals with as few as five doctors. Some doctors received letters saying that they had to leave or else they would be killed. Hundreds of health professionals have been killed, and thousands have fled the country. We also have a shortage of medicine and medical equipment. We couldn't get anything during the embargo, and even after three years, we still have not gotten enough new equipment. There are not even ambulances, so most emergency cases do

not end up well. We heard that a lot of money was spent to rebuild Iraq's health sector, but we haven't seen any of it on the ground.

The Ministry of Health has no authority. If Iraq had the authority and money, we could bring everything in, but we have neither. Before the invasion, I was working in the department which was responsible for the export and import of medicine. We inspected every drug that came into the country. But now the borders are open and nobody analyzes the medicine that comes in. Some of the drugs that you find at hospitals, pharmacies and on the black market are either expired, ineffective or illegal.

**epic:** If you were Iraq's Prime Minister, what would be your three top priorities?

**Rashad:** I would put the wellbeing of Iraqi people first, all Iraqi people. I would not think about myself, or my party, or other countries, but just the wellbeing of my people. All that the Iraqi people are speaking about is security, and the U.S. military is responsible. So first I would work to quickly phase out the presence of the U.S. troops and form a balanced and capable Iraqi army. Second, I would meet the challenge of rebuilding Iraq. I would approach that effort from all sides, including the education and health sectors. Lastly, I would focus solely on Iraq for a few

years, thinking about our country and not others. Let's think of just Iraq, and relations with our neighbors since we don't want to be anyone's enemy.

I would embrace the contributions and ideas of all Iraqis, not just a few. You have to speak with the majority, with the women, with the political leaders, and with the religious leaders. They are influential and can have an effect. We can benefit from their participation even if we decide to build a secular government in Iraq.

**epic:** Here in Washington, some members of Congress are calling for a timetable to withdraw U.S. forces. What do you think should happen?

**Rashad:** If we pull out the troops now, it will lead to a sectarian war. Of course this issue is written about in the newspaper every day, and has been fixated on by the media. But I think that Americans are more concerned about this than Iraqis. We are more worried about other problems, like education, medicine shortages, and electricity. More than three years after the invasion, there are still areas that suffer from extended power outages and unsanitary water. It seems

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like one problem leads to another. But obviously security is the biggest issue.

I am not a politician or an army officer. The military that entered our country should have had a plan to leave, and they sent a bad signal when they started to build 14 permanent military bases. This makes Iraqis think that the U.S. is digging in and planning to stay. However, if and when the U.S. starts to build a basis for trust again, for example by announcing to the Iraqi people that they will pull the troops, we will still need American help to rehabilitate our army in a balanced, non-sectarian way.

The violence in my country is not from us; Iraqis are a peaceful people. This violence has been created by the wars that we have been pushed into. Three years ago we did not have car bombs exploding in the streets, killing women and children. In my view this has been created by the U.S. troops who have not upheld their responsibility to abide by international laws. They have not protected our borders or kept us secure. The only ministry that was protected was the Ministry of Oil, and this sends a message to the Iraqi people that oil is the most important thing to the USA, not our lives, not our civilization, not our education, and not our healthcare.

After more than three years of so little progress, people begin to lose hope. And that can lead to terrible things. It's time that we saw a light at the end of the tunnel.

**epic:** What are some similarities and differences between American and Iraqi perspectives regarding U.S. involvement in Iraq?

**Rashad:** This is the difference: we do not have the same values, habits, character or history. In these last three years, the U. S. has just listened to its own voice, but I think it is time to listen to authentic Iraqi voices. If you listen to the people who are in the midst of the conflict, they will help you better understand how to end the violence and suffering because they have firsthand knowledge and experience.

I have met some American families who have lost their children in Iraq, and I am very sad for them in the same way and to the same degree that I am sorry for the people of my own country. When I met them, we were not speaking, we were just shedding tears because we felt the same way; we are human beings with the same feelings. When I said to one father that I was sorry for the death of his son, he came to me, put his hand on my hand and said, "I'm sorry that my son was helping to destroy your country." This means that both of us were victims of this wrong policy. There has been a long history of the U. S. working this way, and I think the time has come to change direction.

I came to this country not thinking of myself, but thinking of my children, and I hope I can do something for them and for all children in Iraq. I believe my efforts also serve children here in the U.S. because ending this conflict will decrease the violence and suffering for both nations. Everyday we have losses on both sides, from the Iraqi side and the American side. Who benefits? There has been a terrible mistake that has to be corrected, and I hope we can find some people who will listen to us. The time has come for us to think about how we can create our future with an Iraqi vision that is not subordinate, but equal to an American vision.

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**The Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC)** works to end armed conflict, defend human rights, and build support for democracy and development in Iraq through educational programs, research and policy change. Founded in 1998, we work closely with non-governmental and government agencies, aid workers, Iraqis and a member network of more than 30,000 concerned citizens across the United States.

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