

Women and the 2003 US War in Iraq: A Call to Peacebuilding

Kali Rubaii and Elizabeth Groppe

Abstract: On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations Women, Peace and Security Agenda (UNSCR 1325), which articulates the distinct and horrific harms that war perpetuates against women and also recognizes the essential roles of women in maintaining peace and security, anthropologist Kali Rubaii shares some of her ethnographic research in Iraq with special attention to women. Her ethnographic interviews, participant observation, environmental sampling, and mapping in Iraq in 2014-15 and again in 2021–2024 are evidence that the 2003 US-led war in Iraq caused grave immediate and long-lasting harms to Iraqi women in forms including deaths, toxic exposures, reproductive hardship, loss of educational opportunity, reduction of social status, and post-war reconstructive burdens in a context of destroyed physical and social infrastructure and ecological degradation. Catholic theologian Elizabeth Groppe offers a response. Together, the two authors advance the theses that (1) the case of the 2003 Iraq war demonstrates the moral urgency of both UNSCR 1325 and the Catholic Church’s call for transcendence of the practice of warfare; and (2) the case of the Iraq war also demonstrates the need for the Catholic Church to broaden and strengthen the Catholic practice of peacebuilding.

THIS ISSUE OF THE *Journal of Moral Theology* MARKS THE twenty-fifth anniversary of the United Nations Women, Peace and Security agenda and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), adopted in 2000. This special issue of the journal is also being published two years before the twenty-fifth anniversary of the March 2003 decision of United States President George W. Bush to initiate the Iraq war. The publication also follows shortly after the pontificate of Pope Francis, who emphasized the importance of the practice of listening and the cultivation of cultures of encounter.¹ In the first portion of this article,

¹ See, for example, Pope Francis, “Listening with the Ear of the Heart: Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 56th World Day of Social Communications,” January 24,

anthropologist Kali Rubaii enables us to listen to the experiences of Iraqi women unduly burdened by war through her account of the ethnographic research she conducted in Iraq in 2014–2015 and again in 2021–2024, sharing her experiences of encounter. Theologian Elizabeth Groppe then responds to Rubaii from the perspective of the Catholic tradition of ethical reflection on matters of war and peace. Together, the co-authors contribute ethnographic evidence and ethical reasoning in support of the two theses that: (1) the case of the 2003 Iraq war demonstrates the moral urgency of both UNSCR 1325 and the Catholic Church's call for transcendence of the practice of warfare; and (2) the case of the Iraq war also demonstrates the need for the Catholic Church to broaden participation in its mission of evangelical peacebuilding to include all the baptized.

First, a brief historical note. In the minds of many people in the United States, the chronology of the 2003 Iraq war begins with the deadly September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Members of al-Qaeda used three hijacked passenger planes as weapons, and a fourth aircraft intended to hit the White House was disabled by passengers. In actuality, the 2003 war must be understood in the context of a long history of US-Iraq relations, although September 11, 2001, was indeed a pivotal moment. Although the majority of the hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, the United States under the leadership of President George W. Bush, responded immediately with war on Afghanistan, whose ruling Taliban regime was hospitable to al-Qaeda. Alternative approaches to counter terrorism, such as those proposed by political science scholars George A. Lopez and David Cortright in *Uniting Against Terror*, were only very selectively pursued.² The Bush administration also began preparations for war in Iraq. The administration maintained that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (who was not affiliated with al-Qaeda) possessed biological and chemical weapons and was reconstituting a nuclear weapons program.³ In September 2002, President Bush articulated a

2022, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20220124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html; *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 215–217.

² George A. Lopez and David Cortright, *Uniting Against Terror: Cooperative Nonmilitary Responses to the Global Terrorist Threat* (MIT Press, 2007). The US administration did employ nonmilitary means in relation to Saudi Arabia. On responses to terrorism, see also Glen H. Stassen, "War on Terrorism? A Realistic Look at Alternatives," in *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach (Liturgical Press, 2007), 45–67.

³ The US Senate *Report on Postwar Findings about Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare to Prewar Assessment Together with Additional Views* (2006) states that Hussein was "distrustful of al-Qaida and viewed Islamic extremists as a threat to his regime." Cited in E. Christian Brugger, "The Waging of the 2003 U.S. Led Iraq War: A Catholic Just War Assessment," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2009): 151, doi.org/10.1177/0021140008101889.

doctrine of preemptive military action.⁴ On October 16, 2002, the US Congress authorized the use of the Armed Forces against Iraq.⁵

Meanwhile, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued statements calling for a peaceable approach; Pope John Paul II exercised peacemaking diplomacy; and Dominican sisters continued a “We Have Family in Iraq” peacebuilding initiative begun in 1999 in response to the suffering of the people of Iraq under economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council after Hussein’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent US-led Persian Gulf War.⁶ Nonetheless, despite these Catholic peacebuilding efforts, US-led coalition forces (including troops from the United Kingdom with smaller contingents from other countries) initiated war in Iraq with a bombing campaign intended to cause “shock and awe” on March 20, 2003. US forces would not be withdrawn until 2011.⁷

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR FOR IRAQI WOMEN

Today, one cannot drive into Fallujah from Baghdad without passing the mass grave of unknown dead. During the US-led invasion initiated in 2003, thousands of human beings were killed by bombs, tanks, and firefighting, but also by disease, medical deprivation, and destroyed civilian infrastructure. Thousands more were injured. Millions were displaced. Beyond military violence, policies implemented by the United States during its occupation fundamentally transformed Iraq’s economy and political structure.

The history of military violence in Iraq is repetitive and enduring. It includes, for example, the “Highway of Death,” where in 1991 American-led forces attacked retreating Iraqi military personnel attempting to leave Kuwait. However, the 2003 invasion and subsequent decade of counterinsurgency wrought unprecedented violence.

⁴ George W. Bush, “The National Security Strategy of the United States,” §V, September 2002, georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss5.html.

⁵ 107th Congress, “Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces against Iraq,” Public Law 107–243, October 16, 2002, congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-joint-resolution/114/text.

⁶ The stated purpose of sanctions was to gain compliance with cease-fire provisions under UN Resolution 687. International economic sanctions, write David Cortright and George A. Lopez, are a nonmilitary means of enforcing international norms. The form that the UN sanctions took in Iraq, however, caused severe economic and social hardship for the people of the country. Cortright and Lopez fault both the character of these particular sanctions as well as the failure of Saddam Hussein to fully comply with the UN in a manner that could have brought the sanctions to an end. See Cortright and Lopez, “Are Sanctions Just? The Problematic Case of Iraq,” *Journal of International Affairs* 52, no. 2 (1999): 735–755.

⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, under “Iraq War,” July 20, 2026, britannica.com/event/Iraq-War.

Between March 19 and April 18 alone, in thirty-one days, the US dropped 19,040 precision-guided bombs, 8885 unguided unitary munitions, and 1276 cluster bombs. In the first forty-eight hours of the invasion alone, the US used more than double the entire arsenal used during the Gulf War.⁸ The invasion also permanently altered Iraq through policies including Paul Bremer's 100 Orders,⁹ which systematically gutted the public sector, privatized all economic sectors, restructured Iraq's constitution, induced a reorganization of social groups through divide-and-rule tactics, deregulated labor and environmental oversight on extractive industry, and removed criminal liability for corporations and armed actors.¹⁰

Among these chaos-inducing decisions was Bremer's immediate disbanding of the Iraqi army, which left four hundred thousand men suddenly unemployed, armed, and without pensions.¹¹ The rapid formation of militias¹² absorbed their skilled labor, building armed resistance almost immediately after the invasion. Organized armed resistance to the US invasion centered in what the US called "The Sunni Triangle" in Anbar province.¹³ Cities like Fallujah and Ramadi faced intensive firefighting, heavy bombardment, and targeted attacks on urban infrastructure. In April 2004, the US launched "Operation Vigilant Resolve": two thousand US marines surrounded and cordoned off Fallujah city.¹⁴ Airstrikes destroyed homes, mosques, the two main hospitals, the city's electrical grid, and the water sanitation system.

⁸ Mark Griffiths and Kali Rubaii, "Late Modern War and the *Geos*: The Ecological 'Beforemaths' of Advanced Military Technologies," *Security Dialogue* 56, no. 1 (2025): 38–57, doi.org/10.1177/09670106241265636.

⁹ Paul Bremer was the de-facto head of state in occupied Iraq, as the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the temporary government established in Iraq upon US invasion. For details on his "100 Orders" and their impact, see Antonia Juhasz, "The Hand-Over That Wasn't," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2004, latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-aug-05-oe-juhasz5-story.html.

¹⁰ Yousif Bassam, "Economic Restructuring in Iraq: Intended and Unintended Consequences," *Journal of Economic Issues* 41, no. 1 (2007): 43–60, doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2007.11506994; Abbie Claire Taylor, "Intricacies and Implications of Iraq's Health Predicament" (MA Thesis, Georgetown University, 2002).

¹¹ Hazem Sangheih, "The Life and Death of de-Baathification," *Revue de mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 117–118 (2007): 203–223, doi.org/10.4000/remm.3451.

¹² Militias are armed units aligned with and funded by a number of sometimes changing organizations, including tribes, political parties, states, and imperial powers.

¹³ Tareq Ismael and Max Fuller, "The Disintegration of Iraq: The Manufacturing and Politicization of Sectarianism," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 2, no. 3 (2009): 443–473, doi.org/10.1386/ijcis.2.3.443_1.

¹⁴ Angus Dermonty, "Fallujah—How the US Murdered a City," *Solidarity.Net*, March 15, 2024, solidarity.net.au/imperialism/fallujah-how-the-us-murdered-a-city.

Only 30 percent of buildings remained standing.¹⁵ Resistance from Iraqi people mounted. Months later, in November of the same year, “Operation Phantom Fury,” a ground invasion, launched on Fallujah. It was the bloodiest battle of the US-led war in Iraq. Many fled, but about fifty thousand people remained: men were not allowed to leave the city. Iraqi families were shot in their homes; bodies rotted on the streets, sometimes eaten by dogs.¹⁶ In subsequent years, the US continued to target Fallujah with raids and counterinsurgency campaigns.

One of the many consequences of the US invasion and the subsequent dismantlement of a national Iraq was that Anbar province, and Fallujah specifically, remained a site of political contestation in the 2010s, when popular nonviolent protests calling for political reform were hit with mass arrests and proxy policing by Al-Hashed, an aggregate of Shia militias working for the Iraqi government.¹⁷ A divided Iraq was vulnerable to forces like ISIS, which captured Fallujah in 2014. By 2016, people had been trapped between ISIS and Al-Hashed, and the Iraqi government had dropped barrel bombs on hospitals and neighborhoods using US F-16s.¹⁸ The city was levelled for a second time in 2016. During these two decades of episodic destruction, cities like Fallujah did not see an infusion of resources to support the daily lives of the people who continued to live there. Without full restoration of municipal resources like water, electricity, and public medicine, or state-level public support like agricultural subsidies, peoples’ recovery and survival in their homeland was constrained and sometimes impossible.

¹⁵ Ross Caputi, Richard Hil, and Donna Mulhearn, *The Sacking of Fallujah: A People's History* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Iraq Family Health Survey Study Group, “Violence-Related Mortality in Iraq from 2002 to 2006,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 358, no. 5 (2008): 484–493, doi.org/10.1056/nejmsa0707782.

¹⁷ Dahr Jamail, “Maliki’s Iraq: Rape, Executions and Torture,” *Al Jazeera*, March 16, 2013, aljazeera.com/humanrights/2013/03/201331883513244683.html; Priyanka Boghani, “In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki’s Iraq,” *PBS Frontline*, October 28, 2014, pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq; Kirk Sowell, “Maliki’s Anbar Blunder,” *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2014, foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/15/malikis-anbar-blunder.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Government Attacking Fallujah Hospital: Barrel Bombs Hit Residential Areas,” *Human Rights Watch News Release*, May 27, 2014, hrw.org/news/2014/05/27/iraq-government-attacking-fallujah-hospital; “Baghdad to Buy 36 F-16 Aircraft,” *MEED*, July 31, 2011, meed.com/baghdad-to-buy-36-f-16-aircraft.

Iraqi Women and Survival in the Wake of War

UNSCR 1325 emphasizes that violent conflict perpetuates harms against women “in ways that are distinct, horrific and must be stopped.”¹⁹ The ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and environmental sampling and mapping that I conducted in Iraq from 2014 to 2015 and again from 2021 to 2024 document ways that women and their families in Fallujah continue to experience the consequences of war decades after the US invasion.²⁰ These consequences include ongoing reproductive hardship resulting from gutted medical infrastructure and exposure to toxins; a reduction of women’s societal status following the dismantle-ment of the education system; and hefty restorative burdens, as women do much of the reparative cleanup from wartime damages. As one woman said of the responsibility of postwar recovery, “In the end, it always comes down to the mothers. We are responsible for the whole community.” The UNSCR articulates four action pillars: prevention of conflict, protection of the rights and safety of women, participation of women in all decisions about peace and security, and shared responsibility for relief and recovery. Yet, women were widely unsupported in leading post-war relief and recovery.

The women I interviewed carry the burdens of war in their bodies, in their social lives, and in their tremendous efforts to rebuild their communities. Most were explicit about the source of these burdens: American imperialism has brutalized their communities in ways that continue to cause illness and dispossession, especially among women. In listening to these women, one is also reminded that women do not exist in isolation from others: their lives are inseparable from those of fathers, brothers, husbands, children, extended family members, and community.

During my trip in 2024, I brought two American researchers, James and Elaine,²¹ to collect samples of hair, nails, blood, and X-ray fluorescence (XRF) bone readings to measure the presence of heavy metals related to the war.²² Participants I had interviewed in prior

¹⁹ “What Is the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda?,” *UN Women*, October 20, 2025, unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/what-is-the-women-peace-and-security-agenda.

²⁰ Research for this study was approved by the Purdue University IRB under protocol numbers IRB-2020-769, IRB-2022-292, and 2024-39, and by Anbar Ministry of Health and Environment under protocol number 202112. All names are pseudonyms.

²¹ While pseudonyms can erase people’s authorial voices, they also remain a necessary protection from the possibility of reprisal or stigma connected to my research.

²² Inundation of heavy metals like lead, cadmium, uranium (to name a few) has multiple war-related sources including weapons like missiles and bullets; military bases and their burn pits which combusted computers, tanks, and other materials; and destroyed infrastructure like rebar and detonated cars. These generate secondary health effects during and after warfare. For a list of these metals and their mechanisms of dispersal,

years came to a room at the Fallujah Women and Children's Hospital to enable XRF bone readings and to give drops of blood, clips of toenails, and strands of hair for testing. I had briefed my two American colleagues on my position that our team should view Iraqis' choice to interact at all with an American research team as an act of generous engagement, given the recent historical violence perpetuated by Americans. Measuring heavy metals was not just about finding traces of war; it was also about human contact. Some of the people we were meeting had been tortured by American hands. Others witnessed extreme mass violence by American soldiers. Now, twenty years since the infamous and bloody 2004 battles in Fallujah, people were being asked to entrust American strangers with their bodies, however momentarily, to find traces of that very violence deep inside their bones. A small payment of twenty-five Iraqi dinar to compensate their time was certainly no offset to the broader implications of this human touch and all its moral weight.

I had spoken with these families before, and many of them repeated their stories to James and Elaine, sharing anger, pain, and disgust with us. Fathers and husbands were often the spokespersons for their households in approaching these new scientists. For example, one couple came in for biological sampling. While Fatima sat for James to do an XRF reading of her shin bone, her husband Mohammed sat while Elaine pricked his finger with a lance and squeezed his fingertip until a large drop of blood spotted the sample paper below, coded with a number to match the family exposure history, which included life-altering violent events. Mohammed murmured gently in Arabic to Elaine and she smiled back, not knowing what he had said, which was this: "You give me twenty-five IQD for a drop of my blood. How much will you give me for [our] dead child?" He spoke for himself and Fatima, whose silent gaze on Elaine gave an equally powerful emphasis to his question.

Today, Mohammed is pressed to provide for his wife and children things that, as he described to me, "used to be free and part of the country until the Americans came." In their efforts to rebuild Iraq, he and Fatima need money and resources to survive the destruction of their home in a context of limited jobs and stunted educations. They must find a way to obtain in-home water filters and generators and items like wheelchairs. These are conditions that produce the deaths of children.

I went back to my ethnographic notes and the exposure history that Fatima and Mohammed had given two years before. Fatima was born

see Kali Rubaii and Mark Griffiths, "Deferral and Dispersal: The Military Violence of Post-War Clean-up," *Human Organization* 84, no. 1 (2025): 56–68, doi.org/10.1080/00187259.2024.2429998; Griffiths and Rubaii, "Late Modern War and the *Geos*."

in 1988. She has a second-grade education. She lived through the 1991 US bombings and a decade of sanctions as a child. The 2003 US-led war and the 2010s ISIS invasion shaped her teenage years and her twenties. She was displaced twice and endured periods of malnutrition thrice. She married in 2008 and has given birth five times. While her memories of sanctions-era starvation are vivid—hunger she describes as “so painful it kept me awake as a child. I chewed on objects to calm my stomach”—she identifies her reproductive history as the center of her wartime losses. Her first pregnancy was a traumatic one: in 2009, she gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. Her son died after three days. Her daughter survived with spina bifida that limits her mobility. She had three more children with no complications, but in 2017 she had a stillbirth—a child born without a brain (anencephaly). After this loss, Fatima decided to stop having children. Their story is not exceptional but rather illustrates a broad pattern of how women in Iraq shoulder the majority of post-war restorative labor, suffer reproductive harm resulting from gutted medical infrastructure and exposure to toxins, while simultaneously experiencing a reduction in social status from Iraq’s dismantled education system.

Fatima attributes her birth outcomes to God’s will, but both Fatima and Mohammed also identify US weapons as a cause of their two infants’ deaths and their daughter’s disabilities.²³ Like many of her peers, Fatima experienced extreme war events during her childbearing years. In 2004, she lived in Fallujah and witnessed the entire city levelled by US forces. Her own home was bombed while she was at a cousin’s house; she returned to a fragmented building covered with dust and burn marks and littered with shards of explosives. While some of her family remained trapped in the second battle of Fallujah and were killed by American snipers, she lived in a tent in a refugee camp until 2007. She returned with her family to repair their home, without masks or gloves, during a period of malnutrition. During this same period of time, her soon-to-be husband, Mohammed, had much lower exposures to weapons residues like smoke or metallic dust from explosives: like so many Anbari men, he was kidnapped and taken to the US-run Abu Ghraib torture camp, where his imprisonment protected him from toxic exposures but did not spare him torture and humiliation.²⁴ He was released a few months before their wedding in 2008.

In 2014, the couple witnessed US F-16 fighter jets, purchased by the Iraqi government, drop barrel bombs on their neighbor’s house in

²³ In addition to weapons exposures, researchers attribute poor birth outcomes to vitamin deficiency and malnutrition from displacement or sieges.

²⁴ Mohammed’s torture continues to affect their lives in the form of trauma and related challenges with his ability to maintain employment.

Shuhada, Fallujah, less than one kilometer from their home. Fatima ran to her children to cover their faces as black smoke entered their house and made a thick fog inside. They all coughed for hours, waiting for the shrieking noise of aircraft to pass. Trapped in the city by ISIS and Al-Hashed militias, with bombs dropping above, they were again hungry and afraid. Eventually they escaped to the Amriya refugee camp, where they remained until they returned to Fallujah in 2017, while Fatima was pregnant with the child who would be stillborn.

Along with other poor residents of the city, Fatima is a frontline first-responder to disaster, doing much of the reparative labor that post-war recovery requires. She boils water, clears rubble, cooks food, dusts, and conceives and cares for new human beings. Alongside her husband, she has rebuilt the city of Fallujah and its population, over and over. Yet, these dramatic war events and their chemotoxic aftermaths are only part of her story. The reality is that Fatima's limited education, birth experiences, periods of malnutrition, and her quality of life are all shaped by the long-term effects of US policy written in the early 2000s and slowly actualized over the past two decades: namely the rapid privatization of public resources.

Under the US Coalition Provisional Authority in 2005, Paul Bremer's Orders 1-100 reshaped political representation and opened Iraq's economy to private, transnational enterprises that could operate with minimal regulations, siphon profits out of the country without infusing resources back into the community, and bear little or no accountability for damage to ecosystems, neighborhoods, or workers' health. Twenty years later, families who once drank water from the tap and used electricity from the public grid are forced to purchase individual disposable water filters, consume bottled water, and operate diesel generators for lighting and cooling, if they can afford it. These methods for surviving accelerate ecological damage and exacerbate financial inequality by requiring families to seek private pay solutions for public health essentials.

With a gutted public sector, the burdens of making and sustaining life in post-war environments have been left to individual families, primarily led in recovery efforts by poorer women. The cascading effects of privatization policies in the wake of the US occupation strain women disproportionately: Iraq once boasted the highest literacy rates for girls in the region, but since the US invasion, it has one of the lowest. In 1987, the year before Fatima was born, about 75 percent of Iraqi women were literate. By 2007, Anbar province had some of the lowest literacy rates in Iraq, among both men and women; with more than 44 percent of women lacking basic literacy.²⁵ With plummeting

²⁵ "Iraqi Women Facts and Figures," *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Inter-agency Information and Analysis Unit*, 2007,

education levels, the age of marriage dropped for women: this is a key indicator of women's diminishing social status. There are fewer women holding public office, and policies such as the 2025 repeal of Iraq's minimum marriage age of eighteen more readily prevail in spite of mass outcry.²⁶

With fewer women in leadership, other policies—like those that bolster women's health—are also less likely to receive funding allocations. Infrastructural violence including divestment from women's healthcare pose immediate obstetric risks to women. In my interviews of eighty women in and around Fallujah who had given birth since 2017, a large number described obstetric hardships related to dismantled infrastructure and deprivation of public resources. For example, a majority of the women whom I interviewed prefer C-sections because the public hospital lacks the resources to provide pain medication of any kind to women who are not undergoing surgery. Khadijah, a young woman who opted for a C-section, said, "In the end, it is safer." She described how a C-section gave her access to four things she would not otherwise obtain: a hospital bed for the duration of her labor, pain medication, a doctor rather than a nurse, and prescribed postpartum rest. Resource triage at public hospitals is not uncommon, but the level of resource management I witnessed during my visits to the public hospital in Fallujah is an extreme result of both war-induced infrastructural damage and lack of reinvestment in public resources.²⁷

While scholars have linked a high incidence of congenital anomalies in cities like Fallujah to military environmental contamination,²⁸ what makes many congenital anomalies *lethal* is the lack of infrastructure and expertise to provide timely in-country surgeries or infection

unocha.org/attachments/7268b271-61b2-318b-9bcf-afb0806e12bd/9FF462D0A9FBFA07492575730052330C-Full_Report.pdf.

²⁶ Alex MacDonald, "Protests Across Iraq Against 'Sectarian' Law that May Allow Child Marriage," *Middle East Eye*, August 9, 2024, middleeasteye.net/news/protests-iraq-law-sectarian-allow-child-marriage-may.

²⁷ Catherine Lutz and Andrea Mazzarino, eds., *War and Health: The Medical Consequences of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* (NYU Press, 2019); Omar Dewachi, "Iraqibacter and the Pathologies of Intervention," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, July 2, 2019, merip.org/2019/07/iraqibacter-and-the-pathologies-of-intervention.

²⁸ Kali Rubaii, "Birth Defects and the Toxic Legacy of War in Iraq," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, September 22, 2020, merip.org/2020/09/birth-defects-and-the-toxic-legacy-of-war-in-iraq; Chris Busby, Malak Hamdan, and Entesar Ariabi, "Cancer, Infant Mortality and Birth Sex-Ratio in Fallujah, Iraq 2005–2009," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 7, no. 7 (2010): 2828–2837, doi.org/10.3390/ijerph7072828; M. Al-Sabbak et al., "Metal Contamination and the Epidemic of Congenital Birth Defects in Iraqi Cities," *Bulletin of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology* 89, no. 5 (2012): 937–944, doi.org/10.1007/s00128-012-0817-2.

control.²⁹ Similarly, most women who have children with disabilities bear sole responsibility for caretaking. In some towns, public schools without resources for wheelchair ramps send physically disabled children home for their mothers—many of whom were deprived of educations themselves—to teach them what they can, without support. Fatima, for example, homeschools her daughter, not because her daughter has cognitive disabilities that require specialized education, but because the school does not have wheelchair ramps, and, in any case, Fatima's family has no resources for a wheelchair. This is one example of how individual families are expected to find private solutions to public issues, all because of a standard of divestment set by the shock of war and maintained by policies that send inter-generational ripples down family lines.

Wartime Constrictions on Women and Islamic Institutions as Allies

In the US, some people may have considered a US military presence in the country of Iraq as a force protective of the country's Muslim women. Warfare in the name of women as a universal social category was, and remains, one of the core alibis for military domination. For example, Laura Bush famously supported the bombing of Afghanistan by citing solidarity with Afghan women—against its men—and frequently referred to her “sisterhood” with Afghan women.³⁰ But *war* is a major force that compounds restrictions on women's lives. For example, the US invasion destabilized Iraq, sparking ransom kidnappings, sexual assault, torture, and random detonations, thereby decreasing women's mobility and access to public spaces. War is an antifeminist machine that puts women under enclosure as a route to physical survival.³¹

Scholars like Gayatri Spivak caution about Western goodwill, or sisterhood, which can sometimes fail to understand its own desire for intervention as “saving brown women from brown men.” It is important to understand the possibility for solidarity with women in Iraq in its own, necessarily anti-imperialist, terms. This means that

²⁹ Omar Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford University Press, 2017); Merrill Singer and Derrick Hodge, *The War Machine and Global Health: A Critical Medical Anthropological Examination of the Human Costs of Armed Conflict and the International Violence Industry* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 138.

³⁰ Kim Berry, “The Symbolic Use of Afghan Women in the War on Terror,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 27, no. 2 (2003): 137–160.

³¹ Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (University of California Press, 2009); Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, “Feminism, the Taliban and Politics of Counter-Insurgency,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339–354, doi.org/10.1353/anq.2002.0031.

peacebuilding in partnership with Iraq's Muslim-majority communities requires attunement to Islamic epistemologies. For example, familiarity with Islamic feminism(s), which differ from secular feminist frameworks formulated in Europe and the US, can inform those seeking to be in solidarity with people who operate within different paradigms of identity and justice. Many Muslims interpret the Koran as a feminist text: these include Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Fatema Mernissi, Riffat Hassan, and Amina Wadud, to name a few.

In the context of my research, Islamic institutions have served as pragmatic allies for women in Fallujah facing reproductive violence from warfare, including crowdsourcing funds for medications or facilitating bereavement rituals. It is during the fourth month of pregnancy that some women I interviewed found out their fetuses had anencephaly. Anencephaly is fatal, and the obstetric risks in these circumstances are high, including the chance of septic infection if the fetus were to die *in utero*. Under Iraq's secular penal code 417, abortion is illegal except to save the life of the mother. Certain interpretations of Islamic law, however, state that abortion is permissible before ensoulment in the fourth month when there is no chance of infant survival. It was through their local Fatwa Committee³² that several women I interviewed attained abortions protecting them from the danger of septic infection or the physical and psychological suffering of giving birth to a stillborn with no brain. This is one way the gutted Iraqi state is eclipsed by other establishments (like family, tribe, or mosque) to protect and bolster women's struggle for post-war recovery and physical safety.

Attending to the Child: Whither Reparations?

"You give me twenty-five IQD for a drop of my blood," Mohammed had murmured in Arabic to Elaine when she pricked his finger for testing. "How much will you give me" he continued, speaking also for Fatima, who sat beside him, "for our dead child?" Implied in this question is the truth that American researchers are implicated in their own findings, and that to bear witness to heavy metal loads caused by military exposures meant—or should mean—contending with the stories attached to those measurements. Attending to the "smoking gun" left by the residues of US weapons without attending to the child that these weapons killed would be to participate in, rather than refute, the epistemic violence already so extensive in denying and minimizing the violence such measurements signified. With an XRF reader that could pull information from deep in the bones, the question of justice

³² The Fatwa Committee is an Islamic council responsible for issuing decrees for things like divorce or abortion.

was also drawn to the surface, onto the tips of our fingers. As Elaine pierced Mohammed's skin, more than blood dripped out, including the question of how quantification and measurements might be meaningful to the injustices of which the blood test is proof.

Elaine's warning as a health specialist—that it is when uranium and lead come back *out* of bones (as one ages or during pregnancy) that they do damage to one's health—was also taking place socially. Resurfacing the evidence also resurfaced the interpersonal, real-time and seemingly obvious response: whither reparations? If the evidence was right here, right now, *in vivo*, why not justice? The politics of finding high levels of lead and uranium in people's bones were made lively by the compression of material evidence with the question of justice in real-time.³³ Mohammed and Fatima were asking Elaine, personally, what she thought she owed them. They were also asking a bigger question about what harms count as deserving reparation, given the intergenerational violence that readily hides in the *longue durée* and is easily overlooked in discourse on reparative justice. Bearing witness to the factors shaping Fatima's life or sitting with Mohammed's question about the price of his blood, reopens the question of what it means to act in solidarity with Iraqi women and their families here and now.

Material support may be one of the most important routes to solidarity with women like Fatima who are enacting the slow, costly, unglorified, daily, and often unseen ways the work of repair is done. There is also need for international and interfaith support for Iraqi organizations working to repair local ecologies, de-privatize the economy, and support women. These include grassroots groups like "Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq" and "Humat Dijlah"—Iraq's river protectors.³⁴ Material aid and support for repair is not only a matter of accounting for the injustices of the past but also of supporting Fatima and other women in their commitment to their children's future.

A CATHOLIC RESPONSE

It is heart-wrenching to read Rubaii's account of her research among Iraqi women who are valiantly working toward familial and social repair in a context that may be chronologically "post-war" but in which the consequences of the US-led invasion endure. "In Ramah is heard the sound of moaning, of bitter weeping! Rachel mourns her

³³ For more on material compressions and witness bearing, see: Kali Rubaii and Saiba Varma, "Troubling Complicities: The Anthropologist as (Im)moral Subject?" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 13, no. 2 (2023): 377–393, doi.org/10.1086/727740.

³⁴ See owfiraq.org and humatdijlah.org.

children, she refuses to be consoled because her children are no more” (Jeremiah 31:15). My response to Rubaii will engage her work from the perspective of the Catholic tradition of ethical reflection on matters of war and peace.

Ius Post Bellum

For the first several centuries of the Christian era, Christians conscientiously abstained from participation in warfare.³⁵ Subsequently, Augustine (354–430 AD) initiated what would become known as the just war tradition of ethical reflection, arguing that there could be circumstances in which Christians could engage in warfare in order to protect the innocent.³⁶ The current form of this living tradition distinguishes criteria for entering into war (*jus ad bellum*), criteria for the conduct of war (*jus in bello*), and criteria for just conduct in the aftermath of a war (*jus post bellum*). Mohammed’s question on behalf of both himself and Fatima—“You give me twenty-five IQD for a drop of my blood. How much will you give me for our dead child?”—is a question of *jus post bellum*.

In a brief 1994 article, moral theologian Michael J. Schuck articulated three *post bellum* principles: (1) repentance, humility, and remorse on the part of the victors “for the price of war paid not only by their comrades but also by the vanquished”; (2) terms of honorable surrender that do not humiliate the opponent and that protect fundamental human rights; (3) restoration, consisting minimally in removal of the instruments of war and maximally of repair of infrastructure.³⁷ Moral theologians Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright contribute to the development of *jus post bellum* ethics a reflection on reconciliation; accountability, justice and restitution; and political, economic, social, and environmental restoration.³⁸

In the presence of an American research team, Mohammed and Fatima raise questions of accountability and restitution. But the

³⁵ See, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Early Christian Pacifism: Tertullian and Origen,” *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Fortress Press, 2019), 71–90.

³⁶ See Cahill, “Augustine and the Beginnings of Christian Just War Theory,” *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 91–137.

³⁷ Michael J. Schuck, “When the Shooting Stops: Missing Elements in Just War Theory,” *The Christian Century* October 26, 1994, 982–983.

³⁸ Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright, “*Jus Post Bellum*: Extending the Just War Theory,” in *Faith in Public Life*, ed. William J. Collinge (Orbis Books, 2008), 241–264. See also their subsequent work including *After the Smoke Clears: The Just War Tradition and Post War Justice* (Orbis, 2010) and “Growing Edges of Just War Theory: *Jus ante bellum*, *jus post bellum*, and Imperfect Justice,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2012): 173–191, doi.org/10.1353/sce.2012.0039.

determination of what constitutes justice *post bellum* requires consideration of the history of a war, including assessment of the decision by those in authority to go to war (*jus ad bellum*) and assessment of the conduct of the war (*jus in bello*). A full ethical accounting of the 2003 Iraq war is not possible here, but the criteria *ad bellum* and *in bello* must nonetheless be borne in mind when considering the questions raised in Rubaii's research and other accounts of post-war Iraq. Regarding the criteria *ad bellum*, the Bush administration maintained that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that he was prepared to use against the US and that a "preemptive" war was therefore justified.³⁹ Catholic moral theologian E. Christian Brugger examined three US intelligence reports that together comprise over 1500 pages and concluded that "the principal reasons set forth by the Bush administration in order to justify a preemptive war against Iraq were not supported by evidence that allowed for anything approaching moral certitude" and that "the choice to go to war failed—and failed badly—to meet the normative moral condition for a just cause."⁴⁰ (Indeed, no WMD were found by the US after the invasion.) The normative *jus ad bellum* conditions include defense of self or others from a lasting, grave, and certain danger (just cause) and last resort.⁴¹

Within the conduct of war, the ethical criteria *in bello* include noncombatant immunity. "Civilians may not be the object of direct

³⁹ Moral theologian Kenneth R. Himes explains that what President Bush describes is not technically "preemptive" war but rather preventive war. A preemptive military action is a response to an evident imminent attack, such as troops of a threatening power poised for invasion at one's border. "Properly understood, preemption is an extension of the right of self-defense, albeit anticipatory defense. Preventive war is different. Preventive war is meant to avoid some eventual or possible outcome that a state views as undesirable. It is an attack launched in response to a future (and uncertain) threat. Preventive war leads to a focus on capability not intent. The result is a cycle of escalation as mutual fear of attack puts all parties on edge." Kenneth R. Himes, "Intervention, Just War and US National Security," *Theological Studies* 65, no. 1 (2004): 147–148, doi.org/10.1177/004056390406500104.

⁴⁰ E. Christian Brugger, "The Waging of the 2003 US Led Iraq War," 154. The three reports that support his conclusion are: *Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the Director of Central Intelligence on Iraq's WMD* (based on findings gathered between June 2003 and September 2004); US Senate, *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq*, July 2004; and US Senate, *Report on Postwar Findings about Iraq's WMD Programs and Links to Terrorism and How They Compare with Prewar Assessments Together with Additional Views*, September 2006.

⁴¹ Brugger, "The Waging of the 2003 US Led Iraq War," 132–133. Other criteria *ad bellum* include right intention, legitimate authority, proportionality, comparative justice, and probability of success. See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace," November 17, 1993, usccb.org/resources/harvest-justice-sown-peace; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2309.

attack,” the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) explains in its statement *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, “and military personnel must take due care to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians.” The *jus in bello* criterion of proportionality stipulates that force should be limited to what is militarily necessary “to avoid disproportionate collateral damage to civilian life and property.”⁴² Rubaii has described in broad terms the catastrophic consequences of the Iraq war for civilians, and she also enables us to listen to the experience of one particular couple, Fatima and Mohammed, who lost two children and who are caring for a daughter with spina bifida. Fatima experienced the destruction of her home and long periods of displacement and malnutrition, and Mohammed suffers from the consequences of the torture to which he was subjected at Abu Ghraib. Moral theologian Kenneth R. Himes corroborates that the US was indeed abusing detainees in Iraq in ways that violated international and domestic law and that in some cases constituted torture. This was not an aberration, as some suggested; a report of the Senate Armed Services Committee and other supporting documents provide “good reason to see the problem as systemic.”⁴³ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* emphasizes that “International juridical instruments concerning human rights correctly indicate a prohibition against torture as a principle which cannot be contravened under any circumstances” (no. 404).

Allman and Winright’s moral framework for justice *post bellum* calls for a third party (such as the UN) to mediate post-war justice and the restitution owed by the perpetrators of war to those whom warfare has harmed. In the case of Iraq, the entire war was an unjust act, waged on assertions about Hussein’s possession of WMD that were not true and putting a premature end to international efforts to continue UN weapons inspections in Iraq. But there has been no third-party mediation of post-war justice, no Congressional discussion of restitution, nor even an expression of remorse to the people of Iraq.⁴⁴ What can US Catholics do in this context? Rubaii emphasizes the

⁴² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace.” See also *Catechism*, nos. 2312–2314.

⁴³ Kenneth R. Himes, “The United States at War: Taking Stock,” *Theological Studies* 71, no. 1 (2010): 193–194, doi.org/10.1177/004056391007100111.

⁴⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this article focused on Iraqi women, it is also important to note the war’s consequences for the people of the US, including the harm done to women and men in the US military who were killed and those who suffered physical injury, physical illness, mental illness, moral injury, and trauma. Another consequence was the diversion to warfare of tax revenue and borrowed funds that could have been used for the common good. For one example of a financial accounting, see Joseph E. Stiglitz and Linda J. Bilmes, *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

critical importance of material aid to support women doing the work of repair, and Catholics can contribute aid through organizations such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which does have a presence in Iraq.⁴⁵ We can also teach the history of Iraq in Catholic education programs, advocate for *jus post bellum*, and practice peacebuilding.

The Ethical Imperative of Peacebuilding

Even were the US to make reparations to the people of Iraq, there are many ways that justice *post bellum* cannot be achieved in this earthly life. In February 2009, according to Brugger, the *Iraqi Body Count* database reported between ninety-three thousand and one hundred thousand non-combatant civilian deaths caused by coalition military action, insurgent and terrorist responses to the coalition presence, and criminal actions “arising from the social disorder following the invasion.”⁴⁶ Overall deaths, according to a conservative 2006 estimate, numbered approximately five hundred thousand.⁴⁷ Rubaii’s research demonstrates that heavy metals and toxins related to US military activity continue to take Iraqi lives still today. These are lives that would not have been lost had the US-led coalition not invaded Iraq, but we do not have God’s power to raise the dead. We cannot reverse the course of Fatima’s pregnancies that resulted in one child who lived only a few days, another who was born with spina bifida, and another who was stillborn due to anencephaly. Schuck’s outline of justice *post bellum* calls for removal of the instruments of war, but some of these remain in the very bodies of Iraqi women, men, and children who bear heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, and uranium in their bones.

The irreparability of the grave spiritual, social, and physical harms suffered by the women of Iraq and their families during the Iraq war would be the case even if the claims of the US administration about Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction had been true. For over sixty years, Catholic conciliar and papal teaching has been exhorting humanity to transcend the practice of warfare, and Rubaii’s research is empirical evidence of the wisdom, truth, and moral urgency of this call. In the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Pope John XXIII affirmed that in our age of atomic power “it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice” (no. 127). He called for the establishment of a worldwide democratically-organized body that would have the authority to equitably resolve conflict and prevent war. In an October 1965 speech

⁴⁵ On CRS work in Iraq, see crs.org/where-we-work/middle-east-north-africa/iraq#section-crs-history-in-iraq.

⁴⁶ Cited in Brugger, “The Waging of the 2003 U.S. Led Iraq War,” 153.

⁴⁷ Brugger, “The Waging of the 2003 U.S. Led Iraq War,” 153.

at the United Nations, his successor Pope Paul VI passionately urged: “Never again war, never again war! It is peace, peace, that has to guide the destiny of the nations of all mankind!”⁴⁸ On the day following this UN address, the Second Vatican Council began discussion of the section in *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* on “The Fostering of Peace and the Promotion of a Community of Nations.” This text promulgated by Pope Paul VI and the worldwide body of bishops describes the arms race as an “utterly treacherous trap” and articulates our duty to “strain every muscle in working for the time when all war can be completely outlawed by international consent,” which will require the institution of an international public authority “endowed with the power to safeguard on the behalf of all, security, regard for justice, and respect for rights” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 81). Pope John Paul II decried warfare repeatedly over the course of the twenty-six years of his pontificate. In a 1982 World Day of Peace Message, for example, he described war as “the most barbarous and least effective way of resolving conflicts” and emphasized the urgency of the establishment of effective international institutions to secure justice and peace.⁴⁹ Throughout his papacy, he lamented the ways in which war causes human death and suffering, destroys infrastructure, squanders public funds that could be used to meet human needs, degrades the environment, fuels cycles of animosity and desire for vengeance, and requires soldiers to kill, an act that can have long-term psychological and spiritual consequences.⁵⁰ In 2015, Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Holy See permanent observer at the United Nations, spoke to the Security Council about the distinct forms of degradation that warfare inflicts upon women.⁵¹ Pope Francis called for an end to the “madness of war,” and Pope Leo states in his 2026 encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* that “humanity possesses far more effective and capable tools for promoting human life and resolving conflicts, such as dialogue, diplomacy, and forgiveness. The use of

⁴⁸ Paul VI, “Address to the United Nations,” October 4, 1965, vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651004_united-nations.html.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, “Peace: A Gift of God Entrusted to Us!” Message for World Day of Peace,” January 1, 1982, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19811208_xv-world-day-for-peace.html.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 52; *John Paul II for Peace in the Middle East—War in the Gulf: Gleaning through the Pages of “L’Osservatore Romano”* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991).

⁵¹ “Holy See at UN Condemns Violence Against Women in Armed Conflict,” *Independent Catholic News*, April 25, 2015, indcatholicnews.com/news/27284.

force, violence and weapons reflects a relational poverty that always has disastrous consequences for civilian populations” (no. 192).⁵²

Means of transcending the practice of warfare include the establishment of civil institutions of international conflict resolution as well as the practice of active nonviolence, the cultivation of cultures of peace, and the work of peacebuilding. The practice of peacebuilding, Catholic theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill explains, unites Christians who are pacifists and those who are not in the work of concrete, practical actions to address the root causes of conflicts, cultivate just social relationships, and develop the social and material infrastructures that support enduring peace. Catholic peacebuilders act in cooperation with the full spectrum of religious and civil society organizations and national and international governments.⁵³ In *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, editor Glen Stassen and contributing authors articulate ten practices they identify as ethically normative, empirically observable, and demonstrably effective for the prevention of war.⁵⁴ And, in an article on *jus ante bellum*, Maureen O’Connell writes that the Catholic Church could contribute to peacebuilding through the practice of faith-based diplomacy in which professionally trained representatives build trans-national relationships with representatives of other faith traditions across the globe.⁵⁵

Catholics did practice peacebuilding in advance of the Iraq war. On September 13, 2002, as the US administration was moving toward the invasion of Iraq, Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, wrote a letter to President Bush on behalf of the 60-member Administrative Committee of the Conference that expressed “serious questions about the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq.” He respectfully urged President Bush to “step back from the brink of war and help lead the world to act together to fashion an effective global response to Iraq’s threats that conforms with traditional moral limits on the use of military

⁵² Pope Francis, “In the Name of God, I Ask that We Stop the Madness of War,” *I Am Asking in the Name of God: Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope*, trans. Stephen R. Di Trolio (New York: Image, 2023), 45–53.

⁵³ Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 1–36, 283–363. See also Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, “What Is Strategic Peacebuilding?,” kroc.nd.edu/about-us/strategic-peacebuilding.

⁵⁴ Glen Harold Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Pilgrim Press, 1998).

⁵⁵ Maureen O’Connell, “*Jus Ante Bellum*: Faith-Based Diplomacy and Catholic Traditions on War and Peace,” *Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* 21, no. 1 (2011): 3–30, doi.org/10.5840/peacejustice201121116. See also Douglas Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

force.”⁵⁶ On November 13, 2002, the full Bishops’ Conference reiterated these moral questions. “Based on the facts that are known to us,” they stated, “we continue to find it difficult to justify the resort to war against Iraq, lacking clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature. With the Holy See and bishops from the Middle East and around the world, we fear that resort to war, under present circumstances and in light of current public information, would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force.” At issue, they emphasized, are “matters of life and death.”⁵⁷

On Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2003, President Bush received Cardinal Pio Laghi, an emissary of Pope John Paul II. The cardinal, a tennis partner of former President George H. W. Bush, bore a letter from the pope asking the president to receive his emissary and to “listen to the message that he bears on my behalf,” a message that “represents what lies in the depth of my heart for the good of all people.” Following the meeting, the cardinal told reporters that he deemed a possible war against Iraq both unjust and illegal.⁵⁸

Dominican sisters from several congregations in the US were also deeply engaged in pre-war peacebuilding, and they exemplify the contributions of women to peacebuilding highlighted in UNSCR 1325. In December 1998, Timothy Radcliffe, OP, in his role as Master of the Order of Preachers, spent time in Iraq with Iraqi Dominicans and then shared his experience with others in Rome, including US Dominican Sister Margaret Galiardi, who was attending a meeting at Santa Sabina while serving a term as promoter of justice for her congregation. Radcliffe’s account of his experience included the testimony of a Dominican sister in Iraq who told him that because of the impact the UN sanctions intended to disempower Hussein were having on the entire population, “We feel as if even God has forgotten us.” Sister Margaret recalls: “I was very deeply moved by the depth of suffering that this statement by a person of faith revealed.”⁵⁹ She knew she must respond in some way and that simply writing a letter to Congress was inadequate. After speaking with Sister Anne Montgomery, a Religious of the Sacred Heart who had been to Iraq, Sister Margaret conceived the idea of organizing a personal delegation to

⁵⁶ Wilton D. Gregory, President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Letter to President Bush Regarding Iraq,” September 13, 2002, uscbb.org/resources/letter-president-bush-regarding-iraq-september-13-2002.

⁵⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Statement on the Use of Military Force Against Iraq,” November 13, 2002, uscbb.org/resources/statement-use-military-force-against-iraq-november-13-2002.

⁵⁸ Paul Moses, “Vatican Diplomacy and the Iraq War: Unheeded Warnings,” *Commonweal*, January 13, 2020, commonwealmagazine.org/vatican-diplomacy-iraq-war.

⁵⁹ Conversation with Margaret Galiardi, OP, July 22, 2026.

Iraq. As Dominican women, she explained, our ministry does not stay at the theoretical level but is always “on the ground.” With the help of both Sister Anne and Dominican Sister Eileen Gannon, who responded “in a heartbeat with no hesitation” to Margaret’s suggestion, three delegations were formed: the first was composed entirely of women (1999), the second was composed of seven women and two men (2000), and a third was composed of nine women and one man (2001). In Iraq, the delegates witnessed cities gutted by the Gulf War and received gracious hospitality from the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, who had prayed and slept in the basement of their Motherhouse as bombs fell and who now subsisted on meager provisions. Members of the US delegations rode in taxis whose “seats” were nothing but springs because of the way in which the sanctions prevented post-Gulf-war rebuilding and repair, and they beheld an Iraqi woman in a hospital holding her dead child in her arms. “We called it the ‘Iraqi *Pieta*,’” Sister Margaret comments.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, back in the United States, some feared for the safety of the delegates, but there was much interest in their journey and great support. “You are praying to ensure that what you are doing comes from God,” Sister Margaret explains, “and I feel like once we started the Holy Spirit took off and ran with the idea and we were running to keep up.”⁶¹ The Dominican sisters advocated in Congress on behalf of Iraqi people suffering because of the UN sanctions, and in 2002 some undertook a 28-day water fast against the looming war. “We Have Family in Iraq” became the theme of their peacebuilding work.⁶² “There was very much a ‘sister-to-sister’ feel to this,” Sister Margaret comments. At the same time, the intent of this language articulated by Sister Toni Harris, OP, was not only to express the relationship between the US Dominicans and their Dominican sisters in Iraq—who would in 2014 flee their Motherhouse in Mosul on foot—but also to express the bonds of humanity between all Iraqis and all the people of the United States.⁶³ “The program,” Sister Reg McKillip, OP, explained, “is our claim that we have [Dominican] family in Iraq, but all of us have family in Iraq, because we are all connected.”⁶⁴

And yet, despite the diplomacy of Pope John Paul II, the moral testimony of Bishop Wilton Gregory and the USCCB, and the “We Have Family in Iraq” initiative of some Dominican sisters, the US and

⁶⁰ Conversation with Margaret Galiardi, OP, July 22, 2026.

⁶¹ Conversation with Margaret Galiardi, OP, July 22, 2026.

⁶² For one example of Catholic media coverage, see globalsistersreport.org/column/justice-matters/equality/we-have-family-iraq-journey-solidarity-and-love-17501. In practice, both the phrase “I Have Family in Iraq” and “We Have Family in Iraq” were used.

⁶³ Conversation with Margaret Galiardi, OP, July 22, 2026.

⁶⁴ Cited in Patti Ahem, “I Have Family in Iraq,” *Busted Halo*, April 30, 2007, bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/i-have-family-in-iraq.

its coalition partners launched an invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Had the actions of Catholic leaders stopped the movement toward war, the catastrophes that Rubaii describes would not have happened. The fact that the acts of love of Catholic leaders did not stop the war is evidence not that Catholic peacebuilding is inevitably ineffective but rather that there is an urgent need to broaden participation in the church's mission of peacebuilding to include all of the world's 1.422 billion Catholics. To adopt a well-known statement that G.K. Chesterton articulated in a different context, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."⁶⁵ In face of the evidence of the catastrophic and irreparable harms caused by practices of warfare such as those described by Rubaii and other authors, it is morally imperative to preemptively build cultures and relationships of peace. Peacebuilding is an essential dimension of the vocation not only of popes, bishops, and religious women but of all those baptized into Jesus Christ, who is the prince of peace (Isaiah 2:1–4; 9:5).⁶⁶

There is a great diversity of ways in which peacebuilding can be practiced. The Dominican sisters offer one inspiring example. There are Dominican congregations in both Iraq and the US and this facilitated communication (without email or cellphones) and relationships. But the Catholic Church as a whole is also transnational in form and structure, and this has enabled some US dioceses to develop twinning programs in which a Catholic parish forms a relationship with a Catholic parish in another part of the globe. Can we imagine a Catholic Church in which every parish in the world has a sister congregation in some other nation—sister congregations that may include not only other Catholic parishes but also congregations of persons of other faiths?⁶⁷ Participants could exchange letters, pray for one another, send delegations to visit each other in person, and undertake actions of peacebuilding appropriate to the particularity of their relationship and its histories. The establishment of transnational and interreligious congregational relationships could contribute to the cultivation of a shared social identity among persons who belong to potentially competitive groups, and anthropologist Douglas Fry identifies such "crosscutting" ties as one of the social conditions that can build and preserve peace.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), 48.

⁶⁶ On a related point about baptism as initiation into a transnational church "which is to supersede all other tribal and national identities," see Gerald W. Schlabach, *A Pilgrim People: Becoming a Catholic Peace Church* (Liturgical Press, 2019), 200.

⁶⁷ See, for example, the programs of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati: resources.catholic.aoc.org/offices/mission-and-pontifical-mission-societies/parish-twinning.

⁶⁸ Douglas P. Fry, *Beyond War: The Human Potential for Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 215–216.

One of numerous priorities could be the establishment of congregational relationships between Catholic parishes in the US and communities in Iraq, where today 99 percent of the population is Muslim.⁶⁹ (Historically, Iraq was home to diverse communities, including some of the oldest Christian communities in the world. The dwindling of the Christian population from around 1.4 million in 2003 to 250,000 today is another casualty of the 2003 Iraq war and its aftermath.⁷⁰) Were my own Catholic parish to approach a Muslim community in Iraq regarding a possible sister-congregation relationship, we would seek relationship as Catholics and Muslims who in the words of *Nostra Aetate* share a faith in one God, the merciful and all-powerful creator of heaven and earth (no. 3). We would be related through God in an interreligious bond that transcends the boundaries of nation-states. But we would also be related in our particularities as citizens of one country (the US) who waged an unjustified war with catastrophic consequences for the people of another (Iraq).⁷¹ We would need to ask ourselves: Why should the people of Iraq trust us? What would we need to learn from them? What actions of repair could we undertake? We have much to learn from Rubaii's research in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The ethnographic research and ethical reflection shared in this article have contributed support for our two theses. First, the case of the 2003 Iraq war demonstrates the moral urgency of both UNSCR 1325 and the Catholic Church's call for transcendence of the practice of warfare. The UN resolution highlights the "distinct, horrific" harms that war inflicts on women; in Iraq, this is evident in manifold ways including the confinement of women to their homes because of the dangers of both sexual assault and weapon detonations; the interruption of the education of school-age girls and young women, leading to reduced opportunities and social status when they are adults; mothers and children who suffer stillbirths and congenital anomalies caused by wartime malnutrition and exposure to military toxins; childbirth made dangerous by a context in which medical infrastructure has been decimated; abortions necessitated by the danger of life-endangering

⁶⁹ Pew Research Center, "Religious Composition by Country," June 9, 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2020](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country-2010-2020).

⁷⁰ Jean Charles Putzolu and Lisa Zengarini, "Christians in Iraq Still Fear Insecurity," *Vatican News*, March 6, 2024, [vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-03/christians-in-iraq-still-fearing-insecurity.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2024-03/christians-in-iraq-still-fearing-insecurity.html).

⁷¹ On ecclesial relationships of peacebuilding as both transnational and particular to inculturations, see Schlabbach, *Pilgrim People*, 200. For his reflection on "An Ethic of Guesthood" with an example specific to Iraq, see *Pilgrim People*, 201.

sepsis when carrying an anencephalous child who will die either *in utero* or at birth; and the burden of repairing lives, homes, and social fabrics in conditions of gutted infrastructure and environmental degradation. This historical reality is empirical evidence of the wisdom and truth of the Catholic social tradition that for the past sixty-five years has called upon humanity to transcend the practice of warfare and to employ civil means to resolve conflicts or redress injustice.

Secondly, the case of the 2003 Iraq war demonstrates the need for the Catholic Church to broaden participation in its mission of evangelical peacebuilding. Papal diplomacy and the moral testimony of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops were vitally important acts of peacebuilding in the months leading up to the US decision to initiate war, but they did not prevent the war and its catastrophic consequences. Moreover, peacebuilding is part of the vocation of all the baptized, including women. UNSCR 1325 celebrates the contributions of women to peacebuilding and calls for the inclusion of women at all tables where decisions about peace and security are being made. In the case of Iraq, the gifts women can contribute to peacebuilding are evident in the courageous and creative actions of the Dominican sisters who led the “We Have Family in Iraq” initiative. The transnational and interreligious relationships of love that they cultivated among members of God’s human family can inspire reflection on ways that the full body of Christ can together practice multiple forms of peacebuilding, working toward that day when “One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again” (Isaiah 2:4). 

Kali Rubaii is a cultural anthropologist whose scholarship focuses on displacement, health justice, and the environmental impacts of war and military supply chains. She leads the Parts Per Million Project and is the author of *Resurgency: Outlasting the War on Terror in Iraq* (Duke University Press, 2026). Through forensic ethnography, Rubaii’s work bears witness to the violent material impacts of war on people’s lives. Her research aims to sharpen collective strategies for survival where coercive power meets the physical world.

Elizabeth Groppe is professor of theology and religious studies at the University of Dayton. Her work on peacebuilding includes the essay “‘This Is My Body’: The Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the Call to Be Peacemakers,” in *Sharing Peace: Mennonites and Catholics in Conversation*, edited by Gerald Schlabach and Margaret Pfeil (Liturgical Press, 2013).