

***“I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, national guardsmen, and policemen: each of you is one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God’s words, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop the repression.”***

*--Abp. Óscar Romero of San Salvador, 23 March 1980, the day before he was shot and killed while saying mass - by US-trained paramilitary soldiers, during the Carter administration’s attempt to suppress the revolution in El Salvador*

As we approach the nightmare of renewed, expanded US war in Iraq, I think of Archbishop Romero’s words and example. Romero aligned himself, steadily, with the most impoverished people in El Salvador, learning about their plight by listening to them every weekend in the program he hosted on Salvadoran radio. With ringing clarity, he spoke out on their behalf, and he jeopardized his life challenging the elites, the military and the paramilitaries in El Salvador.

I believe we should try very hard to hear the grievances of people in Iraq and the region, including those who have joined the Islamic State, regarding US policies and wars that have radically affected their lives and well-being over the past three decades. It could be that many of the Iraqis who are fighting with Islamic State forces lived through Saddam Hussein’s oppression when he received enthusiastic support from the US during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Many may be survivors of the US Desert Storm bombing in 1991, which destroyed every electrical facility across Iraq. When the US insisted on imposing crushing and murderous economic sanctions on Iraq for the next 13 years, these sanctions directly contributed to the deaths of a half million children under age five. The children who died should have been teenagers now; are some of the Islamic State fighters the brothers or cousins of the children who were punished to death by economic sanctions? Presumably many of these fighters lived through the US-led 2003 Shock and Awe invasion and bombing of Iraq and the chaos the US chose to create afterwards by using a war-shattered country as some sort of free market experiment; they’ve endured the repressive corruption of the regime the US helped install in Saddam’s place.

The United Nations should take over the response to the Islamic State, and people should continue to pressure the US and its allies to leave the response not merely to the U.N. but to its most democratic constituent body, the General Assembly.

But facing the bloody mess that has developed in Iraq and Syria, I think Archbishop Romero’s exhortation to the Salvadoran soldiers pertains directly to US people. Suppose these words were slightly rewritten: *I want to make a special appeal to the people of the United States. Each of you is one of us. The peoples you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a person telling you to kill, remember God’s words, “thou shalt not kill.” No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you ... I command you to stop the repression.*

The war on the Islamic State will distract us from what the US has done and is doing to create further despair, in Iraq, and to enlist new recruits for the Islamic State. The Islamic State is the echo of the last war the US waged in Iraq, the so-called "Shock and Awe" bombing and invasion. The emergency is not the Islamic State but war.

We in the US must give up our notions of exceptionalism; recognize the economic and societal misery our country caused in Iraq; recognize that we are a perpetually war-crazed nation; seek to make reparations; and find dramatic, clear ways to insist that Romero’s words be heard: *Stop the killing.*

*“Stop the Killing,” by Kathy Kelly, Oct. 19, 2014. This article first appeared on Telesur English. Kathy Kelly (Kathy@ucnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence in Chicago.*

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