

SADR CITY

ColdType

APRIL 28 2004

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WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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The Author

JO WILDING is a 29-year-old activist, writer and trainee lawyer from Bristol, UK. She first went to Iraq in August 2001 with Voices in the Wilderness to break the sanctions as an act of civil disobedience and to get a perspective on what was happening for the purpose of advocacy work in the UK. In November 2002 she forced the UK Customs and Excise to take her to court for breaking the sanctions. It was the first time the legality of the sanctions had been considered directly by a British court.

She returned to Iraq as an independent observer in February 2003 and stayed for the month before the war and the first 11 days of the bombing, before being expelled by the Iraqi foreign ministry as part of a purge of independent foreigners.

Her writing about the situation for ordinary people in Iraq was published around the world: the Guardian online, the New Zealand Herald, Counterpunch (US and internet), Australian radio and in Japan, Korea and Pakistan.

Before going to Iraq, she worked as a mental health advocate for Bristol Mind and in the Immigration Department at Bristol Law Centre, as well as studying part time for a law diploma. She completed the diploma in June 2003 and will start studying for bar qualification in September 2004.

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Israa's mother, her sisters, sisters-in-law and cousins heard an explosion about eleven in the morning and another about three in the afternoon. They hear a couple every day, just in their small area of Thawra, or Sadr City. The second one, the afternoon one, went through Israa's bedroom ceiling.

"I was in my house," Israa's husband said. It was around three on Saturday, April 24th. His friend came to visit, so he was sitting with him in the visitors' room with Nuredin and Huda, the older two children, while Israa lay down with the youngest child, Abdullah.

"I went to ask my wife if she would make tea for us, but she said she was too tired, so I went back to my friend. After a while I heard a horrible explosion. My friend went out to see what had happened. I thought our house was OK because nothing happened to the room I was in. My friend said, don't come out; stay in the house. I pushed past him. I tried to go out

but there were people coming up the stairs towards me saying the explosion is in your apartment.

“I opened the door to the bedroom and saw light coming in through the ceiling but it was full of smoke and dust. I couldn’t see anything. I was trying to feel my way, to touch something, calling Israa, Israa. I found her body with her belly open and her bowels outside. I went out of the room and told my friend she was not there.

“Two of my friends went in and took the little one from her arms. She was still cuddling him. I couldn’t believe something bad had happened to the person I loved. I said, if my son was fine then my wife was, too. I kept telling myself I didn’t see her body. I gave Abdullah to my friend and then went to check on the other two kids who were still in the room I was in before. They were very frightened.

“When I came out, I heard one of my friends telling another that Israa was dead. I can’t remember anything else until I woke up with the kids beside me and people crying all around. I can still hear the explosion in my ears. I didn’t see the mortar, but I’m sure it was the Americans. They came to the house later and took away the shell pieces. They couldn’t say it wasn’t them that fired it.

“They told the owner of the house they will pay compensation if they

prove it's an American shell. But what could they have been aiming at? In my neighbourhood there is a hospital, a school, houses, an electricity plant. Do they want to attack those? I believe it was the Americans who fired it, but even if it wasn't them, it's because of them. Even if someone else fired it, it's still because of the occupation."

Nuredin, at six the oldest of the three kids, lay in his dad's lap chewing a plastic ruler. Abdullah just cried and cried in the next room with the women. "No one can comfort him," his grandma said. "He needs his mother. The children will stay with Israa's family; their dad stays sometimes with her family, sometimes with his. Israa was thirty, working in a nearby tax office.

"What am I going to tell my grandchildren when they grow up and ask what happened to their mother? That she died defending her country? She died asleep in her bed."

From the roof of the house, you can see the monument to the Unknown Soldier, shaped like two blue halves of an egg, which has been taken over as a US base. The owner of the house said all the neighbours who saw the explosion told him the mortar came from that direction.

The other explosion that Israa's sisters heard was around the corner, a mortar hitting the pavement outside the front of another residential

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house, killing a grandfather and a little girl. It happened an hour or so after the explosion in the Chicken Market killed 12, maybe 14 people and injured at least 35 more.

The stories, the individual families, the overall numbers are important as a record of what is happening to ordinary Iraqis now. But there is also this: Thawra is described by Western media as a “slum city”, home to between two and a half and four million Shia people, mainly poor, densely crowded and bullied ferociously by Saddam.

A dozen men gathered in the room to tell us about the death of the child and the old man. Mohammed told me how they welcomed the Americans when they first arrived. “I gave them cigarettes. We thought anything would be better. Even Saddam at his worst was better than the Americans.” Another son pulled shrapnel from his pocket. The explosion, he said, filled the houses, shattering all the glass, and killed three people and injured ten. One victim, Jassim, was a 58-year-old builder. He was unwell and walking in the street because it was supposed to be good for his health. Six-year-old Zainab was walking to the shop to buy eggs with her three-year-old sister Noor and their grandma, Thanwa, both of whom were injured when Zainab was killed.

“All we know is it was a US mortar,” Faisal said. “It had the markings on

the shell pieces. We don't know which direction it came from. It was calm and quiet that day. They bombed to try to provoke us so then they can kill us. There are no foreign fighters here. We don't accept strangers here. They raid houses saying they're looking for foreign fighters.

“All this trouble is because they closed a newspaper, because it exposed the truth about Bremer. Why didn't they close the newspapers that exposed the scandal about Bill Clinton and Monica? We didn't do anything to them. They drive through here on patrols all the time and there haven't been any attacks from us because we are waiting for orders from Najaf.”

A vehement debate broke out over Sistani and Al-Sadr, over whose orders were to be followed. “Why do you differentiate between Sistani and Al-Sadr?” one demanded. “They are the same,” another insisted. They differed a bit over whether there were differences; they also differed over whether the Americans were unequivocally worse than Saddam. The latter, in his time, closed more newspapers, for example.

Still they were unanimous in wanting the Americans to leave now. “Immediately,” Hussein said. “They didn't do anything for us. They only invaded. They only brought terrorism.” They talked about the impossibility of sleeping with helicopters constantly overhead, about the nightly

house raids and arrests of young men, about the frequent explosions, mortars falling close to the hospital.

Kerim wanted us to see his mother in the hospital. We didn't have the proper permission to go in but the Facilities Protection Service guards who had seen all the bodies come in didn't much care for the sensitivities of the Ministry of Health and its procedures. An old man was sweeping the floor with a palm branch as the guard told us about a mortar hitting the neighbourhood next to the hospital at 5am the day before yesterday.

Thanwa pointed through her abaya at the places where shrapnel had pierced her body. Kerim's cousin was lying nearby. In front of the house when the mortar hit, he had serious internal injuries, part of his bowel severed. "Most of the women in here were hurt in the chicken market explosion," she said. The Souk Ad-Dejaj actually sells scrap metal rather than birds.

"It was only a mortar," Saad the security guard explained, but they heard the explosion from the hospital. People buy refilled gas canisters from flatbed vehicles or horse drawn carts which traipse around the city, the drivers hooting or banging a stick on a canister to advertise their arrival. The mortar hit one of those. "They found the driver's head on the roof of the market."

People are adamant that they didn't hear any shooting before the explosion. Mayada Radhi was washing clothes at home, opposite the market, when she heard the blast. Shell fragments blasted through the door. She went outside to look for her two children, didn't find them and came back indoors where she saw the blood on her own body, felt the pain and passed out. Hamid, her brother-in-law, a boy in a football shirt and baseball cap, was woken up by the explosion and came out of the house to see pieces of bodies lying in the street.

Five of the family were killed last year in a bombing in the southern town of Kut: only her mother and a brother and sister survived. The hole in the road, the pitted walls of the buildings, the strainer-like front of the lorry standing in the middle of the market place, the dried blood spatters tell a story which rated a mention on the main networks but little more.

In the epic traffic jam surrounding the entire Karrada area, a man with a patched up face and a towel around his shoulders in a pick up indicated that he'd been hurt by an explosion. We opened the windows and he told us he was injured at the Chicken Market.

This is what's become of the bit of town that welcomed the Americans. The temperature hit 40 degrees Celsius (that's 105 F for those among you who think that way). It's almost too hot to do anything, certainly too hot

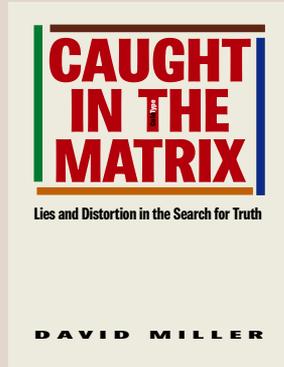
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to sleep when there's no electricity and sometimes no water, either. That and the traffic jam meant we didn't make it to visit and entertain the kids at the camp.

Late, maybe half past eleven, Rana phoned to say there were loads of soldiers around her house; she thought they were going back to the hospital next door to arrest more of the patients.

For the first time all day the air coming through the windows was cool, the streets were deserted but for the packs of scavenging dogs, so at last you could drive through the city. But, when we got there, the soldiers were gone and there was no one to watch us change the wheel on the taxi, push start it and traipse back home.

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