

FALLUJA

ColdType

MAY 2 2004

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but we don’t let strangers in.”*

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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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There is life, again, on the streets of Falluja. There are hugs, there are greetings, there are children watching the town refill from gateways that look out onto the roads where we ran and rode with stretchers and bodies and terrified families. Boys waved at each other across roofs that have been, for the last month, the preserve of snipers. The patchwork of territories and no man's lands is home again.

On the outskirts of Baghdad on Saturday afternoon, a US army fuel tanker was burning furiously and at the checkpoint on the main highway beside the Hay Askeri [Military Quarter] district of Falluja, US soldiers were turning away an exhausted looking family crammed into a Kia, a small Chinese made minibus. Thus far you might not notice anything has changed. Their orders, in the last couple of minutes, were not to let the

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media in either. Gunfire sounded. They said there were still snipers over there, indicating the buildings of Hay Askeri, couldn't say whether theirs or the Mujahedin's.

The Iraqi soldiers wearing armbands of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps were new though, in camouflage uniforms and assorted shoes. Part of the security problem in the last year has been that the Coalition hasn't properly equipped the Iraqi police and army. It's common to see the police in blue shirts, IP arm bands and their ordinary jeans and trainers, which makes it hard to tell a genuine checkpoint from an Ali Baba one.

The checkpoint was, apparently arbitrarily, only letting through 200 families a day, of around 8,000 thought to have left, so the thin dusty back roads that were our way in and out during the fighting were the main route for the returners. Saad came through earlier in the day to check that it was safe. There was no fighting on Friday or Saturday and no checkpoints this way, he said.

Seventeen family members were travelling back together in a pick up. They left 26 days ago, on the fourth day of fighting, because of the air strikes. They stayed, crowded, with relatives in Abu Ghraib. They turned off the road onto a dusty track beside the river, two men and a woman in the front, another man in the back holding up a white cloth, 13-year-old

Hussein leaning on the bare pole behind the cab. One of the boys held his arms in the air in celebration as we drove into Falluja.

Everyone raised a hand in greeting to the ICDC guards who waved us straight through a checkpoint. Everyone raised a hand also to the Mujahedin fighters in ones, twos and little clusters around the town, their faces still cloth covered, Kalashnikovs still at hand, walking in and out of houses, one holding up the Iraqi flag, one in a black balaclava guarding a corner.

They are waiting, Saad said. "They will shoot the Americans if they come back. We will not accept their patrols. We blame only the Americans for what happened. The fighting in Falluja was because they were shooting civilians. Let them have our oil, we don't care, but let us live in peace. This is only people from Falluja fighting, not foreigners, because of the tribes. If the Americans kill a father or a brother then the tribes want revenge, but we don't let strangers in."

A car flashed its lights, slowed down, passed bags of food to the people in the pick up, offered another to us. Women, men, small children stood by a shop, its shutters open, food on sale in scales and bags. As the pick up slowed down the kids jumped out, ran in through the gate as if to check, then dashed back out to fetch me. Hussein and Betul wanted me to see

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their garden, a small green space with slender trees growing up poles. They pointed out where flowers had been in the spring, asked for their photo taken, two brothers and two sisters, all dwarves.

Hussein's best friend and next door neighbour, a tall thin boy with dark smudges of malnutrition under his eyes, had been back a couple of hours. They shook hands, Hussein bouncing with excitement, Ali looking nervous and exhausted. Their dad showed us the hole in the ground that they'd had to use as a well after the electricity was cut to the whole town, early on, as collective punishment.

Abdulbaker's house was just around the corner, a pile of refilled plastic water bottles in the corner of a room whose floor was covered with pebbles. A trench runs through the hallway because there's no drain, a couple of blankets spread out beside it. The back of the house is open, steps leading up to the roof. It wasn't damaged by the bombing, they said: "We were already poor, without them attacking us."

The last drop off was a few streets away, the children running across the road to reunite with the other part of the family who had got back earlier in the day, cuddling the baby, reorienting. Safa'a wiped her eyes on her abaya amid her laughter, and embraced her children and everyone else's. You have to come back, she insists, when we've straightened things out.

Before we left they gave us a list of phone numbers for the rest of the extended family still in Baghdad, so we could call them when we got back to town and tell them it's safe to go home. The fuel tanker was still burning as we drove back at sunset and still this morning, as aid vehicles and families flowed towards the checkpoint.

Again the seemingly arbitrary limit of 200 families a day was in place, a family comprising up to 25 individuals. All but the driver, women with infants and invalids were required to walk through the checkpoint, to be frisked with a wand while the vehicle was checked with mirrors on the underside.

Lots of them left a month ago, just as the fighting started, and have moved between relatives ever since. Almost as many were leaving as coming in, driving out to fetch the family members still outside. Nazar was going to fetch five surviving relatives from hospital; his mother Zahra and his year-old nephew Sejad had been killed by a missile that landed among them, fired from a US plane as they fled their home, walking to find a vehicle.

A local man, Salam, with a small minibus had already brought back his own family and started ferrying others back. He'd brought two families from Baghdad this morning, and was returning for more. He hadn't heard

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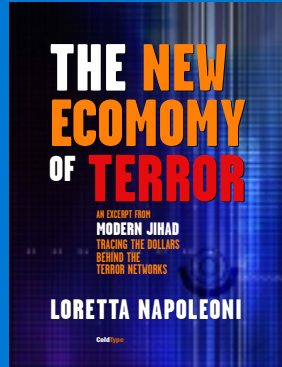
that only 200 would be allowed through in the day. It would take him another couple of hours to get back so he'd have to go in the back way.

He stayed in farms around the town through the fighting; his own house was fine but there are many, he said, whose houses had been destroyed in Hay Julan, Hay Shuhada and Hay Askeri.

but it's not a happy homecoming for everyone. Maki at the clinic said there are still people missing, who haven't yet turned up either living or dead, and the casualty figures from the clinics, hospitals and mosques have yet to be collated.

Several hundred, at least, can never come home.

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