

# BAGHDAD

ColdType

## APRIL 26 2004

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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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**R**abia lowered his voice and informed us that two of the women are crazy. They talk all the time and their rooms in the camp are untidy. They are the mothers of widow-headed households, more refugees from Falluja. White haired under her abaya, toothless, her face lined with the contour map of her life, Fawzia's eyes lit up at having new people to talk to. She chattered happily in Arabic to Anna who didn't understand.

Her daughter-in-law Ikhlas is a Kurdish woman with a tiny daughter, Jwana. The strain cracked her voice as she explained that her sister Sena's husband died two years ago and now her husband is responsible for all of them, without work and crammed into a room in a house which a local man opened up to families fleeing Falluja, near to the bomb shelter where the rest of the family are staying. There's no kitchen there for eight kids, six

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women and a man. Sena too started to cry. Four of her children were with her; the fifth staying in Falluja with an uncle.

Beyda, at 18 the youngest sister, fled Falluja with them and another stayed in Falluja where her husband, only 33 years old, died a couple of days ago from a heart problem. Rabiia told us about him on the last visit: he had to be taken by boat across the Euphrates to the hospital because the roads were closed. He spent a day there and then died. His mother is sick and can't look after herself and his father is too ill to take care of her.

Sena's daughter Sheyma sat still white with shock, unspeaking, unsmiling, fourteen years old and utterly despairing. She's left school. There doesn't seem any point in it. There doesn't seem any energy to find hope to invest in the future.

The little ones still smiled and laughed at the bubbles and balloons but when I gave them drawing things, unprompted, they started drawing aeroplanes dropping missiles on houses, some kind of structure with an Iraqi flag firing back at the aeroplane. Iraq is chaotic and dangerous and I'm glad the others left before it all got worse but I wished then that my clowns were here to turn tanks and bombs into magicians and jokers again.

Because they fled with so little, they need almost everything now. Heba

and Israa sneaked me away to tell me they needed underwear and sanitary towels. Living from hand to mouth, with no work because all their jobs are in Falluja, there isn't even enough for obvious basics. Rabiia said he's running out of money to feed the extended family.

Ali, Heba's new husband, was in the army for two and a half years, until the war. Waiting in the trenches, there were explosions everywhere. He'd no desire to fight anyway and when two bombs fell nearby and didn't explode, he got in the pick up and left, took off his uniform and came to Heba's family's house. He was lying down when we arrived, in pain with his upper back after being hit by a car, a while ago.

Israa is 23 and a philosophy student in Baghdad university, planning to be a teacher when she's finished. She normally stays with other family members in Baghdad during the week and the universities have reopened now after the more widespread fighting, so she's still able to go to university, but most of the Falluja students have stopped going in protest. When she arrived she was told about the boycott and decided to join it, but like Zainab and Maha, like Shayma, a big part of the reason is not protest but exhaustion, depression, homesickness, warsickness, hopelessness.

When gossiping about our lives became too much like a counselling session, we opted for a lighter note, for something utterly insignificant, gig-

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gling about Enders' hair, which was sticking out not unlike a clown's ought to, except that he's a journalist, trying to conduct a serious interview with their dad. They wanted to know who cut it. No one, apparently, for quite a while, so I said I'd do it.

There are now 24 families of Rabiia's extended family staying in Baghdad, three of them headed by widows, totalling 121 people. One son, Ahmed Firas Ibrahim, is still trapped inside the town after he went back. Rabiia said he's advised all the other families not to try to go back yet. The Al-Jolan district was attacked, he said: the locals were not fighting that day, when the Americans came and started raiding houses. The women were screaming and the Mujahedin came out to try and defend them.

"We had to leave our houses unguarded," Rabiia said. "We have heard that the Americans are going into empty houses but not taking anything. We have heard that there are some people starting to steal stuff from the houses but the imams are forbidding it and punishing people who do it."

Rabiia is no Saddam fan: "Saddam is a criminal. I used to be in prison for many years. They put me in a room where I could not see the sun. It started in 1971 and I stayed in Syria for four years in exile because my party, the Arab Nationalist Party, was banned. Then he excused us and we came back to Iraq but I was arrested in the mosque and jailed for 15 years for

being in the party. They put electricity in my ears. I told them I no longer had contact with the party.

“There are a lot of Baathists in Falluja and a lot of Baathists everywhere in Iraq, but the people fighting in Falluja are just defending their homes and families. I was hoping for something positive from this occupation, but I used to have work, at least, and now there is none. We could throw them out with violence but the violence wouldn't stop there, once it started. I still believe in my party and I am angry at Bremer.”

He was in the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the ICDC, which used Shelter No 24 as a station, so he knew the building would be unlocked and he could bring the family there. He was told to go to the local assembly to register in order to get help but refuses to do it because he's convinced that there's a plot between the local assembly and someone from the Red Crescent to get aid and keep it for themselves.

Of another agency, he says they make people stand in a line and give supplies every four days. It's embarrassing, he says, and he won't do it. As much as I know there is still a lot of mistrust, as much as I know that it is sometimes warranted and that there are dishonest people in power here, as much as I can empathise with his pride being wounded at having to stand in line for handouts, I also know it's the only way the family can get



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any meaningful supply of aid but no matter how many times I told him it was the only way, he still repeated, "I cannot."

The phone has been their main source of news from Falluja, getting through when they can to family and friends who are still inside, but the landline to the shelter has been cut off and now they rely on people getting out. Each day we ask them, ask the Red Crescent, ask the people in the camp; each day they say there's been fighting, there's been bombing, there's no way in through the farms or there's one way in through the farms. When the terms of the cease-fire permitted a certain number of families per day to return, people hesitated, unsure the cease-fire would hold, reluctant to drive back into the aerial bombardment.

There are 67 families now at the Iraqi Red Crescent camp, seven of them new arrivals today. The toilets are finally being built and should be finished by midday tomorrow; meanwhile the women are using the facilities in the school on one side of the camp and the men are using those in the mosque on the other.

Qusay Ali Yasseen, spokesman for the IRC, said there are a lot of kids, especially, suffering from diarrhoea, either from unclean water they had to drink on the journey or from unhygienic conditions since they arrived in Baghdad, their immune systems suppressed by trauma and shock. Chest

infections are also rife among the kids because of the heat. Some of them walked for a day or two to safety.

In the middle of each day, local people arrive and unload trays, boxes and pans of food. They have taken on the responsibility of feeding the increasing numbers of homeless, Qusay said. Through the day, other locals arrived in cars to offer help. A three truck convoy flying Unicef banners unloaded boxes of parts for a water tank, a 70 foot tent for a children's area and several crates of crayons and paper and other kids' stuff.

For today though, and until the tent is up, there was nothing for the kids and Boomchucka lived again, yelled through the camp by small people with too much energy and nervous energy to contain. We played parachute games, blew clouds of bubbles and did a good bout of therapeutic shouting on the dusty gap between tents. The kids – proof of how little they've got – begged us to come back tomorrow. The trauma is still fresh with them: you can see it when the planes and helicopters scream overhead. You can see it in the desperation of their need for diversion.

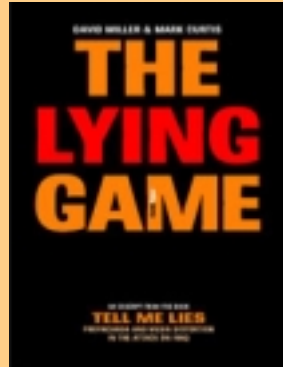
Before we left they started chanting, "Zain, zain, Falluja," [good, good, Falluja]. Kids remember things like this: who made them homeless, who killed their relatives, regardless of any later argument that it wasn't as simple as that or it was all their parents' fault. The news, again, says more

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fighting in Falluja. Some journalists rang to ask us about the new plan that the US has come up with, as if those of us here know anything about it except that they're making war on another whole generation.

So they told us. They told us if the local fighters don't hand over their weapons by Tuesday there's going to be a renewed attack by the US and already the marines have moved into the Spanish base in Najaf ready to invade the city. They say they won't enter any of the holy sites but Sadr's a cleric so the chances are that's where he'd be and Najaf is a minefield of holy sites, including an immense graveyard that's a guerrilla fighter's dream and there's immense potential for antagonising the entire Shia population. I wonder if there's going to come a time when Iraq runs out of 'why's.

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Published by ColdType magazine at [www.coldtype.net](http://www.coldtype.net)