

British journalist Felicity Arbuthnot speaks on Iraq

"There is going to be a bloodbath"

Barbara Slaughter
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Felicity Arbuthnot is a freelance journalist who has visited Iraq 26 times since the 1991 Gulf War. She worked as senior researcher on the film Paying the Price—Killing the Children of Iraq, which investigated the devastating effect of United Nations sanctions on people of Iraq.

The film's title refers to a statement by then US Secretary of State Madeline Albright in 1996 that the deaths of over half a million Iraqis as a result of embargo related causes was, "a hard price but the price is worth it."

Arbuthnot was interviewed by Barbara Slaughter just before she returned to Iraq.

The US and the UK accuse Saddam Hussein of non-compliance with UN resolutions, but the US and the UK don't even have any mandate from the Security Council to comply with. There is no mandate from the United Nations for them to be patrolling the no-fly zones or indeed for the no-fly zones themselves. The continuous bombings of Iraq by American and British forces is illegal.

I personally am convinced that this will be a nuclear war. I think that Bush and Blair are prepared to break that sacred vow on the Hiroshima memorial, which says, "Rest in peace. The mistake will not happen again." And I'll give you one of the reasons why. In 1991 in Tel-Aviv, just before the Gulf War, the Israeli military gave a press conference, and one of the questions was, "What will happen if Iraq lobs anything into Israel?" And the spokesman replied, "We will turn Baghdad into a sheet of glass."

Israel has the fifth largest nuclear arsenal on earth, with two hundred nuclear warheads. Also US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his British counterpart Geoffrey Hoon have made it clear that they won't hesitate to use nuclear weapons.

Nobody has really looked at what Britain and America are rather chillingly referring to as "the day after". We all remember that film in the 1980s about nuclear war called *The Day After*. Who is going to take over?

There is going to be a bloodbath that the British and the Americans have not thought through. Not because these are a warlike people but imagine if the Iraqis or anyone else said "OK, we'll come in and sort out Tony Blair."

One needs to look at the hue of the people outside Iraq who call themselves the Iraqi opposition—the men George Bush says he can do business with—quite apart from the fact that they get a great deal of money from the CIA. Take Ahmed Chalabi for example, who is the spokesman for the Iraqi National Congress (INC). He has been sentenced to 34 years and to 32 years in Jordan to run concurrently for allegedly bringing down, virtually single handedly, the Petra Bank. This is a bank that was set up on the basis that there wasn't a Shia bank in Jordan and the Lebanon. So Shia small businessmen, including market gardeners, farmers and others put their money into his bank. The central criminal court in Jordan found him

guilty of siphoning off money into a bank in Geneva and the Petra Bank just bottomed out and went bankrupt. Many of those investors have committed suicide.

This story didn't see the light of day in the West. In the early nineties there was an international arrest warrant out for him for years. I don't know if it has been rescinded because of his relationship with Washington and Whitehall. But would you give \$97 million, which is what the CIA are doing, to this man? I don't think so.

Another one is Alaawi, who was once Saddam's chief speechwriter. He now edits the INC weekly newspaper, *The Congress*. He was interviewed on German state television two months ago and basically said that when the opposition takes over any Iraqi exile who is against this war will never be allowed home. Those inside Iraq who have ever worked for the regime will be brought with their hands and ankles in chains to Baghdad to meet justice and their maker. About 70 percent of the population worked for the regime in one way or another—in the nationalised industries and the civil service, etc.

A couple of months ago I did a documentary for Channel 4 interviewing Iraqi exiles here who are against the bombing. I thought it would be easy since I have known the Iraqi community for a long time and been trusted by a great many of them. Many of them said to me, "Felicity, no, sorry, not this one. Saddam is over there but they are over here." They were talking about the INC.

A recent article on the *World Socialist Web Site* talks about Saddam being accused of deliberately placing military hardware near mosques and crowded places. Iraq is full of mosques and crowded cities. Here in Britain, air force bases and missiles can be near to big cities. Look at Faslane.

I've visited many of these places. In 1999 we were going down to Basra, an area where there had been an entire area wiped out by cruise missiles. A Pentagon spokesman said at the time that this was because they were hiding tanks and missiles in civilian areas.

We got to this poverty-stricken little area, where 47 houses were wiped out and most of the people in them. We were travelling in two Overlander type cars and had to park about half a mile away and lug all our equipment with us because the streets were so narrow. You certainly wouldn't have got a tank down there and as for missiles; the houses were so close together you couldn't put a bicycle between them. When our clips were shown to someone at the Pentagon, they just said it had been a mistake.

When we arrived people came running from all over, with lots of children. Suddenly a door of one of the houses that had been rebuilt opened and this man came out, about 30 years old. The crowd fell silent and parted. He produced three battered, fingered photographs from his pocket. They were these three beautiful laughing little girls, all under seven, who had been killed in the "mistake". Later I managed to find a

photograph of one of them after she had been pulled out of the rubble—this lovely little blonde girl, with pigtails and her face all covered with ash.

In over 26 visits to Iraq, I have visited many sites of bombings. Most of them have turned out to be in the middle of nowhere in the most poverty stricken little villages or actually not even villages. In 19 months there were 11 bombings of flocks of sheep with child shepherds on the plains in the middle of nowhere. It is just terrorising the population. There are just too many examples that have no other possible explanation.

UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission weapons inspectors) has said that they now have spy satellites that are so sophisticated they could see a Coca-Cola can in a trash bin. These satellites will also pick up gamma radiation emitted if nuclear weapons are being manufactured. They also say that if chemical or biological weapons are being manufactured they throw out what is described as an “ether”, which sophisticated satellites will also pick up. They haven’t picked up anything whatsoever.

When you look at the enormous facilities that are needed to manufacture nuclear weapons—Los Alamos in the US for example—these are towns half the size of Memphis. They can’t just spring up on the flat Iraqi plain without being noticed. As for this nonsensical claim about the mobile laboratories that make chemical, nuclear and biological weapons, you know you can’t manufacture the stuff in the back of a wagon with a couple of washed out coffee jars. You have to have really sophisticated facilities.

Two of the plants that allegedly produced chemical and biological weapons are located at a place called Ardour on the outskirts of Baghdad and at Malouja, which is west of Baghdad. Most people believe they were veterinarian medicine factories. In October last year I went to visit both sites with Hans von Sponeck, who is the former UN coordinator in Iraq who resigned in February 2000. These were sites that UNSCOM had completely trashed in 1996. They went in with fire-axes and they smashed the doors, windows, equipment, light switches, ventilation shafts.

We asked for permission to visit and when we got there the gates were so rusty we couldn’t open them. Then we had to fight our way through the undergrowth and there was nothing, no electricity, nothing. At the end of last year the Americans were saying these factories had been rebuilt and that they were again making chemical and biological weapons. I rang von Sponeck and asked him about it. He said, “Felicity, they are just in the same state as when you and I visited in 1999. The only difference is that the undergrowth is higher.”

While we are on the subject of lying, when Baghdad was bombed in that four day blitz in 1998, Tony Blair stood up in the House of Commons and he talked about legitimate targets. He said that the Ministry of Defence had been bombed. I got in there two days later and found the Ministry of Defence had not been bombed. What they had bombed was a most beautiful Ottoman building on the banks of the Tigris, which had been the Ministry of Defence at the time of the Ottomans and hadn’t been used for that purpose for 60 years.

In the same statement Blair said they had bombed Saddam’s sister’s palace. But no they had bombed the Abbasid Palace, which was nearly 1,200 years old and has been used as a museum for about 70 years. It doesn’t even have electricity or heating.

Despite all the anti-Saddam rhetoric, we know this war is about oil and the strategic position of Iraq in the Middle East, as a kind of bridge to the Far East, where America and Britain can pursue their oil and gas policies and their political policies.

We are told that these two are Christian leaders, but they forget that this is Mesopotamia. This is where Abraham, father of three of the great religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, was born at Ur. The great ziggurat is still there. This is the first major city on earth and it still gives you goose pimples, it’s so beautiful. This where the land of milk and honey came from. Just down the road there is another ancient site at

Qurna where the Garden of Eden is supposed to have flourished. Nearby is Babylon, where you can still visit the sites of the Hanging Gardens and you can see part of the original site of ancient Babylon from 6, 000 or more years ago, where Hammurabi devised the first domestic laws to protect women and children, their safety and their rights to property. You can go further south to Basra, known as the Venice of the Middle East where the two biblical rivers, the Tigres and the Euphrates meet at Shatt al Arab, where Sinbad left for his magical journeys.

St. Matthew is believed to have been buried at a monastery named after him, which in Arabic is Deirmatti. It’s a very ancient thirteen-century monastery on top of a mountain. Nearby there’s another monastery called St. George’s, where every spring Christians of all denominations have a festival.

Are these two Christian leaders really going to wipe out this extraordinary land of Mesopotamia? Are they going to wipe out Christian history? The whole country is a world heritage site.

We are also told about Saddam’s huge reserve army. But if you see it, it is so pathetic. Twenty years of war, a total of a million dead in the Iran-Iraq war, then the terrible losses in the Gulf War in which it is estimated that 250,000 Iraqis died. And after that all the subsequent bombings, including the 1998 bombings, when there were thousands killed.

Iraq is a country where 46 percent of the population are 16 years old or less. So the embargo was imposed when these 16 year olds were three. These youngsters have had their entire childhood snatched away from them—no toys, no books, no pencils, and no normality. Nothing but ongoing bombings.

These are children like those in every war zone who shake in front of storms, because they think the bombers are coming again and time and again they do. They know their parents can’t protect them. These children grew up very young. They know that all the normal almost primeval things like kissing them better or taking them to bed with you when they are frightened just don’t work. And they are going to end their days as cannon fodder in George Bush’s war for oil. The only people left to go into the army, with a few exceptions, are these kids who have lost their childhood. So this is a war against children.

And the women. It’s no secret—you can go to any schoolyard after three o’clock and you will see the young girls being trained up, with school teachers, doctors. Women, as well as these 16 year old kids is all they’ve got left to fight with. A friend of mine is a professor at the university in Baghdad. At the time of the 1998 crisis, her daughters were 16, 17 and 18. The 16 year old weighed about 84 pounds and she was going off from home in tears because they had been called up for training after school. She was given this old AK 47 rifle and was taught how to load it and so on. But she could hardly lift it.

This is what the US and British troops are fighting against and we are sending in cruise missiles that have “Love to Saddam,” written on the side.

Everyone had always told me that Iraqis were a late night people. It had been a very secular country and you could sit out in the evening and enjoy a glass of wine until the embargo. Then in 1996 Saddam tried to get the Islamic countries on board and it was all stopped. You never really saw anyone out after dark; there was a kind of collective depression. They just went home and struggled to live with the embargo.

Suddenly last October it was as if it was a new country. Every little side street was filled with people playing board games, and people were selling food off battered old tin plates, and people promenading around the squares till late at night. It was as if they were saying, “Oh to hell with it, let’s just get on with life.” When you asked what they thought was going to happen, a number of people just said, “We don’t care anymore. We are just too tired. We are going to live for the day and let them come and bomb us. We just don’t care.” But others would say, “Every time I think of another bombing I just die inside.”

I know there has been a lot of disquiet privately expressed by some US and UK soldiers that this a war that does not have public support. You only have to look at the extraordinary demonstrations, from one end of the globe to the other on the February 15 to know that the world is not behind this war. But the soldiers are being sold the idea that when they go into Baghdad, or Basra or Mosul or anywhere else, when they cross the border from Jordan or Turkey, they will be greeted with flower petals and garlands. I don't think so.

If you are trusted enough, you get to speak to people. If you ask the most rabid anti-Saddam families whether they will be happy when the Americans and British come and get rid of him, they say, "Over my dead body. We have been occupied by different forces for 700 years and it's not going to happen again."

I think these poor kids in the US army are being sold a pup, because once they get over there you'll see an uprising against the British and American troops. They have to sleep somewhere and eat something in a completely alien culture they know nothing about. What are young kids from Cincinnati going to know about Iraqi culture? The situation is very complex. You have the Shia in the south with allegiances to Iran. You've got the Kurds in the north. You've got the Azeris, the Turkomans and the Christians, plus a huge number of tribal complexities. You cannot compare Iraq with Afghanistan. The only parallel I'd draw is with 1990/1991, when the US encouraged rebellion in the north and the south and then they were abandoned.

There will be a settling of old scores, with an awful lot of blood letting that has nothing to do with Saddam. These young troops who do not even speak the language are going to be in the middle of the old civil unrest that haunted the Middle East in the 1850s, the 1920s, the 1930s and again in the 1950s. It should never be forgotten that the last British imposed prime minister was dragged through the streets of Baghdad, not that long ago, and that all that was left of him was compared to the Arabic expression for a shish kebab. We are going to go back to that.

The country has been held together, not perfectly, but more cohesively than at any other time in its history. Had we allowed normality to return by lifting the embargo, it would progress and sort itself out. Saddam is a flicker in the eye of history. Iraq is highly educated, highly sophisticated, highly urbanised. Along with the Palestinians, it has the highest number of PhDs per capita on the globe. When the British left only a little over 30 years ago, the average life expectancy in Iraq was 26 years and the literacy level was just a little over 10 percent. By the time of the Gulf War the life expectancy was 74 for women and a little less for men and literacy was around 90 percent. There was also 93 percent access to clean water and the same for access to very sophisticated modern health care. These are World Health Organisation figures.

They are very political people. Everybody has a radio, they listen to the BBC World Service, and they listen to the Arabic services and know everything that is going on. They might get wall-to-wall government stuff on the TV, but they still know what is going on. It fascinates me when you get foreign correspondents, including the BBC, coming on and saying these poor people don't really know what is going on in the outside world. Like all the Middle East, the Iraqis live under a very repressive regime. But you to have the ability to separate the people of countries from their leaders.

Those young American and British soldiers are going into a poisoned land. Look what happened to the Gulf veterans, and what is happening to the Iraqis. Among the Gulf veterans, the field hospital people who were there for about three months were the worst affected even though they were in Saudi and Kuwait because of the prevailing wind. This time the American troops will be there for much longer. They are going to have the same deformities amongst their children. They will share the same fate.

Nobody has addressed the problems of the Gulf veterans, or the nuclear test veterans of the Pacific, or the Vietnam veterans, or the people in

Vietnam who suffered from Agent Orange. Now kids are being sent as a different kind of cannon fodder to have their whole genetic integrity impaired by being in Iraq.

We should remember too, that although there have been surveys done in Basra in the south, Baghdad was the most heavily bombed and there has never been a survey done to check the radiation levels in Baghdad. [In Basra] some of the weapons used were tipped with depleted uranium, some had a core coating and some had the actual core of the weapons. According to *Jane's* some of the weapons they are going to use at the moment have as much as two tons of pure uranium in one bunker-busting bomb. What has also been discovered now is that it is not even depleted. That was bad enough—with a four and a half billion year half-life, chemically toxic and radioactive. In Basra they have found the bombs that were used had enriched uranium in them—neptunium. It had everything you would expect to find in the nuclear fuel cycle, including three different kinds of plutonium.

Israel will use the opportunity to clear out Gaza and the West Bank—in other words ethnic cleansing. According to many people, they have chosen a place in the eastern quarter of Jordan near Iraq—a completely empty quarter—called Ashraaq. I was initially quite dismissive but I have heard so many well informed Jordanians, including newspaper people, saying there is a lot of American activity up there. I know that a whole 1,200 kilometre stretch between Jordan and Baghdad and suddenly there is this huge new army camp that has been built slap on the Jordanian side of the border. I asked my driver whom I always use what it was. He said that is the new American base for when they ship the Palestinians out.



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