

Interview with Felicity Arbuthnot

US actions in Iraq building a “well of hatred”

Barbara Slaughter
17 September 2003

Felicity Arbuthnot, a freelance journalist, has visited Iraq nearly 30 times since the first Gulf War in 1991 and visited the country again just prior to the recent war. Since the formal declaration of the end of the war she has been able to speak to some of her many contacts in Iraq. She recently spoke to Barbara Slaughter of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Arbuthnot explained how US troops are helping to stoke enormous resentment in the Iraqi people.

“If these young soldiers had been given a crash course on the culture of this place... Iraq has been invaded like so many countries in the region for thousands of years. If they had walked down the streets that they are patrolling, and they had been taught a little bit of Arabic, and they had not gone there with Kuwaiti interpreters or Iraqis who had not been back into the country for 30 years or had been born abroad... This is a huge, huge cultural mistake.”

She explained that on many occasions interpreters have given completely inaccurate translations.

She cited the practice of British and US troops at roadblocks putting up their hand with their palm out. In the Middle East this gesture is a sign of welcome. Arbuthnot explained, “They drive through and they get their heads blown off or their children’s heads blown off like that wretched woman in the south whose baby’s head landed in her lap. How wrong can you get it?”

“Again and again you hear—if only they had knocked we would have let them in,” referring to how American troops are arresting people by breaking into their homes. “They shoot the doors open. They have shot a lot of people who have been standing in their living room. This alone is a disaster because now the security situation is so bad—everybody is so desperate—people don’t have the money to replace anything—they don’t

have the money to replace doors, the wood or the nails. If somebody breaks a window they just have to find something to brick it up with.”

Arbuthnot explained the typical approach of troops entering houses: “The first thing they do—even if the man is in his underpants and has been asleep—is they throw him to the ground. They drag him outside in front of his neighbours. This is not just a ritual humiliation—this is culturally something that is beyond us in the West to describe how appalling this is. Then with just the woman or women and children alone in the home, the woman is made to lie down. Hands are run over her and the children and the young girls. This is a humiliation, but you are looking at a region where there are still ritual killings for this sort of humiliation.”

The invasion of someone’s house, tramping over carpets in their boots, is adding to the growing resentment, Arbuthnot pointed out. “You have to remember even when people are not very religious there might be someone who comes into your house who wants to pray on your carpets. You would never go into a Muslim house with your shoes on. They [the US troops] go in with their great big boots on. They march across the carpet. These carpets are not just houseware in a Muslim home, they are sacred. So they march in.”

Arbuthnot explained that the US is, “paying informers large amounts of money. Everybody is desperate so they telling anybody what they want to hear. There are people who are absolutely desperate. They will shop somebody just to feed their kids.”

She noted numerous reports of soldiers looting, often large sums of money kept in homes because of the insecurity of the Iraqi banks. “Time and time again you are hearing about the Americans going in taking the money, the computer, the marriage gold.”

The US Army has reopened prisons and “they appear not to be putting people in the cells, but putting them outside in the boiling sun in cages just like Guantanamo. People are going there as early as five in the morning and they are saying [to the American guards] where is my father, brother, uncle, son, grandfather whatever and they are just told to go away.”

In Iraq the temperatures can be over 150 degrees Fahrenheit and Arbuthnot referred to a recent article in the *Jordan Times* that reported prisoners were being given low rations of water in spite of the extreme heat.

Arbuthnot recounted reports from friends in Iraq about the behaviour of US helicopters at night. In Iraq in summer many people sleep on the roof because it is the coolest place to be. She said, “the American helicopters come down really low and they fly quite slowly and they look down and they ogle and they do the most terrible thing of all they throw shoes at them.” (In Iraqi culture throwing shoes at someone is an extremely insulting action). Arbuthnot said that by these actions the US Army is building, “a well of hate against them, an absolute well of hate.”

She explained how the infrastructure is in a shattered state and no attempt was being made to restore it. She had visited Iraq shortly after the first Gulf War, in 1992, and after a few months, by cannibalising equipment, the Iraqi authorities were able to organise rationed electricity supply. This contrasts to the current situation where people are being left with no power or irregular supplies. According to Arbuthnot this is a deliberate policy. She had been told that the American tanks have “Peace for Power” written on their sides in Arabic, i.e., power will be restored in return for a cessation of attacks and confrontations by the Iraqis.

Asked what life was like for ordinary Iraqi people and how they were surviving, Arbuthnot explained that virtually everyone had been sacked and women who had gone out to work are now staying at home. Women no longer feel safe on the streets. Reports of rapes and “disappearances” were on the increase. Many children no longer go to school. Children have to rely on male relatives being able to drive them to school, but there are huge shortages of petrol. Drivers might have to queue for 14 to 15 hours to get petrol so getting about by car becomes impossible.

Following the war, patients from psychiatric hospitals

and children from orphanages have ended up on the streets. According to Arbuthnot there are reports of these children “selling themselves to American soldiers.” She added social life has come to a standstill. Children are not able to play in the streets for fear of provoking shootings from nervous US troops.

The colonial occupation is trampling over the cultural and historical heritage of a land known as the cradle of civilisation. Following the end of the war the Americans stood back and let the looting of the priceless treasures from the Baghdad museum take place, now it is reported that the ancient Ziggurat structure of one of humanity’s first recorded settlements, Ur, has been sprayed with graffiti.

Arbuthnot refutes the claims that resistance to the US and British occupation comes only from Al Qaeda or remnants of the Baathist regime. Explaining that to 90 percent of Iraqis fundamentalism is an anathema and that Iraq is a very secular state, she said the opposition to what is happening is across the board. The current situation was best summed up by a filmmaker, someone who knows the Middle East very well. On returning from Iraq he had said to her, “The Americans have done one remarkable thing. They have united this entire complex fractious nation in loathing of the Americans.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact