

# MY JOURNEY TO BAGHDAD

Iraq After the War

## Chapter 1: 2003-2004

I would like to tell you the story of my journey from London to Iraq after the war, in late 2003 and early 2004.

After I had crossed the Turkish border, I reached Mosul city, which was 'liberated' by US forces. I could not recognize this city that I had not seen for 14 years. I felt the absence of safety and security and saw clearly that people's basic needs (such as medicine, jobs, food and money) were unmet. I was very surprised when I saw long queues of cars. When I asked why they were queuing I was told they are queuing for petrol. Imagine, a country with oceans of petrol, and people have to queue for it.

Later we crossed some US tanks on the street. Our driver slowed down, saying it was best not to follow them. Again I wondered, why? He said that if the tanks were attacked, they would not stop to consider who had attacked them but rather shoot everybody around them. He had witnessed this several times.

While we were driving through the city, I saw many children trying to sell chewing gum and cigarettes. They were on the street trying to work to survive.

I asked the driver how he felt about the new situation in Iraq. He told me he was very happy about the collapse of Saddam, but he was not happy about the United States presence in Iraq.

All this time I hardly saw any women on the street. When I did see women, they were all wearing veils. [...]

The next day, I went out with one of the local activists to visit the Kurdish people in Kirkuk who had been exiled by Saddam's regime 13 years earlier. After the war they came back to their homeland full of hope to have their land back, but they lost everything in the war and are now living under tents in very cold weather. In one camp I saw about 280 families, all living under tents. Children were playing with mud. There was a lack of clean water, electricity and food and there were not enough blankets to protect the children from the cold. There were many camps like this one in Kirkuk, which had been one of the richest cities in Iraq. I saw people living in poverty and suffering from hunger, and at risk of a civil war between the various groups of Kurds, Arabs and Turks.

I left Kirkuk with a friend to go to Baghdad. Our journey took about 4 hours. We passed through many checkpoints and saw many US tanks. The whole area was controlled by the US military. After 4 hours, I asked my friend when we would get to Baghdad. He said: "We are in Baghdad". I was really surprised because what I saw was terrible. The houses, the streets and the whole city were devastated. I had thought that I was passing one of Iraq's villages, not the capital city!

I saw very few open shops but many US tanks on the streets. Children were playing with stones, wood and dust and many were collecting plastic and bottles from piles of rubbish. Outside Baghdad I saw women selling vegetables in very cold weather. I saw burning houses and cars. I saw that many big buildings were destroyed. Traffic lights were not working.

It is not easy for me to say what I saw in Iraq. People were queuing in front of many buildings. When I asked what they were queuing for, I was told that they were queuing for their salaries which had not been paid in 3 months. I saw so many children on the streets! Later I found out they were orphans with nowhere to go and no one to take care of them. They suffered sexual and physical abuse everyday.

I saw demolished and burning buildings, and people were living in many of them. When I asked why people were living there I was told that these were makeshift camps: The buildings had been government buildings and now the people whose houses had been destroyed came to live there. They had no choice.

Through the OWFI, I knew that there were about 270 camps in Baghdad and I went to see some of them. Each camp contained 15 to several hundred families. Their living conditions were unbelievable: There were about 10 to 15 people living in small, dirty, damp rooms. There was a lack of water, electricity, medicine, petrol and gas. Children didn't have schools to go to. I noticed that many widows were living there; they had lost their husbands in the war and had no other place to live.

## Chapter 2: Today

Today the situation of women in Iraq is even worse. Women can hardly be seen on the streets anymore, anywhere between Basra and Baghdad. Those women who do attend school or university must wear veils. Women are kidnapped for money, and the incidence of rape is on the rise. When families find out a woman has been raped, she is still at risk of being killed. The trafficking of women and children to neighbouring countries is also on the rise, and 'marriage for pleasure', or 'temporary marriage', is becoming a serious problem (one doctor told me his hospital is sometimes almost empty because all male members of staff go to nearby hotels for so-called 'pleasure marriages').

In the last 6 months many women were killed by Islamic groups in Mosul and other cities because they were working and they had been ordered to stop. Many Christian women have also suffered insults and been threatened by Islamic groups because of their faith.

In March this year, a group of Basra university students went for a picnic and were attacked by an Islamic group. One man was killed for defending a member of the group who was a Christian woman.

There is a complete lack of safety and security. There are many kidnappings and killings. The new constitution is based on Islamic Sharia law and honour crimes are still very prevalent. The female suicide rate is very high; every day one or two women are said to commit suicide, mostly by killing themselves. Yet the government shows no signs of taking responsibility for the situation of women.

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