

## **Interview with Issam Jameel, author of *Iraq Through a Bullet Hole: A Civilian Returns Home***

Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased today to interview Issam Jameel who is here to talk about his new book "Iraq Through a Bullet Hole: A Civilian Returns Home."

*Issam Jameel was born in Baghdad in 1954. After finishing high-school, he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts at Baghdad University and eventually did postgraduate work in theatrical studies. Issam studied acting but was more interested in writing, and he began to write criticism and reviews about local plays that were being performed in Baghdad theaters. This job inspired him to become a playwright, and many of his plays were performed by the National Theater of Baghdad. After departing Iraq in 1994, he worked in a radio station belonging to one of the Iraqi opposition groups against Saddam Hussein. In 2002, he immigrated to Australia where he currently lives.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Issam. I'm very interested in hearing more about your new book "Iraq Through a Bullet Hole: A Civilian Returns Home." To begin, will you tell us what made you decide to write this book?

**Issam:** When I returned home to Australia from a trip to Iraq in 2005, I was disappointed by what I had seen there. It had been my final dream to see Iraq after liberation and the defeat of Saddam Hussein, but the consequences were appalling. My zest deadened and I began to wish, like many others, that Saddam had not been removed. On the other hand, I observed the Australian media was continuously transmitting Prime Minister John Howard's messages that Saddam's overthrow was a victory against terrorists. The Australian people whom I met then did know one fact—there are terrorists in Iraq who are doing their best to obstruct wheels of democracy. But in fact, the truth is so much more profound and intricate, that I decided to write my book to clear up some facts that were obscured from Western readers wanting to know the truth.

**Tyler:** Issam, will you tell us about your past? What was your life like in Iraq before you initially left? And how has life changed in Iraq since the war began and Saddam Hussein's regime was toppled?

**Issam:** I was working in the National Theatre (part of the Iraqi Ministry of Culture), but my life was unstable. Of course there were severe limits on liberty, but life had become very hard after the U.N.'s economic sanctions that were imposed against Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. During the third year of economic sanctions, the price of food soared incredibly. I took a long leave and worked on some small industrial projects, not only to cover expenditures at home, but also to avoid demands from the Iraqi authorities to write plays for political propaganda. Saddam was very generous with people who praised him and that was one of his means to control people. Despite working in the industrial field, I still could not cover our basic family needs. I still remember that the last time I bought a kilogram of sugar it was 90 Iraqi dinars, a very high price considering the normal price was less than half an Iraqi dinar before economic sanctions. Actually, everything became scarce. It was very difficult to do something as simple as fixing a flat tire. Iraqis could make a tire last a very long time with enough patches. On the other hand Saddam was enjoying his luxurious life, and he liked to show off his lavishness to send a message to the Western world that said, "You can see that the sanctions have not affected me because I am enjoying my life." Indeed he did say this exact statement on state television.

Regarding the other part of the question, Iraqis got their freedom after liberation, but they lost much more as well. Actually it would take pages to answer this question, and I tried in my book to clear up these changes. Briefly, I will mention that although Iraqis became able to watch satellite TV, use the Internet and mobile phones, they lost far more in terms of security and safety. The result of the invasion of Iraq is thousands of widows and homeless

children, tens of thousands of unemployed, and the basic needs of civilized life such as electricity, cooking gas, sewer drainage, and fresh water, being unavailable.

As for social life, I can say that the influence of Iran restrains Iraq from any chance to progress or to build a democracy, especially since the Shia parties became the rulers of Iraq, for these parties are allied with Iran. The senior positions in the government are now exclusively reserved for people who are loyal to Iran. Every one who opposes Iran now is simply assassinated.

I want to refer you to the message of Saud al-Fasil, the Saudi foreign minister, on September 21, 2005. He proclaimed that "the American policy in Iraq deepened sectarian divisions and led the country into extraordinary Iranian influence." The Iraqi markets now are full of Iranian goods, even drugs have become a flourishing business. Iraqis scarcely knew about them before the invasion, but now they are smuggled over the border from Iran routinely along with bombs and rifles. After liberation from Saddam, many historical and artistic statues were destroyed by Shia militias just because they represented Sunni kings who had passed away a thousand years ago. This situation is just like what had happened when the Taliban Government in Afghanistan destroyed the statue of Buddha.

**Tyler:** Issam, how did you first manage to leave Iraq, and what, after twelve years absence, made you decide to return in 2005?

**Issam:** In 1993, I sold my small car to raise money to pay the fees imposed by Saddam's regime for anyone who wanted to leave Iraq. I had to leave my family behind in Baghdad until I settled down in Amman, Jordan. It was a very hard time because getting a job in Amman was very difficult. Fortunately, I was able to use the remainder of my money to work in the main vegetable market where people sell and buy in bulk. The market was a difficult job and full of risks because any incorrect evaluation in price could cause you to lose everything you had because of wild price fluctuations. However, after I settled down, I was able to rent a small apartment until I was able to return to Baghdad to fetch my family; I departed Iraq with my family on June 28, 1994.

As for the other part of question, the first three years I spent in Australia were very difficult. I was not able to find a job because no employer would recognize any experience from overseas. This caused me to be depressed, but there was an inner voice calling me to travel to Iraq. I thought to surrender to this voice, even if it was an illusion. I borrowed some money from my sister-in-law to get a ticket to Jordan. After arriving in Amman, I hesitated and became afraid to go further after hearing many horrible stories from Iraqi refugees about the risky road to Baghdad. Then, I received a call from my sister telling me that my nephew has been shot by American troops by mistake. I thought it was my duty to go to Baghdad and provide solace to my brother.

**Tyler:** Issam, once you returned to Iraq, you had many conversations with your family about the situation in Iraq. How do the Iraqis view the United States and its invasion of Iraq? Has anything improved because of the U.S. presence?

**Issam:** You must bear in mind that most Iraqis have had a bad feeling against the U.S. even before the invasion because of the long years of suffering from economic sanctions. They believe that the U.S. was solely responsible for imposing this punishment. This bad feeling increased when the soldiers grew very rough with people as a result of the daily attacks of Islamic insurgents. Obviously, the American troops have not been working in a friendly environment and this reflects upon their actions. The frequent incidents that have taken place by mistake and misunderstanding increased the gap between both sides. Despite all these details, the Sunni community thinks they could bear some potential wrongs from Americans because they believe that the Americans are much more merciful than the Shia authorities. If a member of a Sunni family is caught by Americans, the family thanks God that its son wasn't caught by Shia authorities. Many people have been caught by them and their broken corpses have been flung in the street, or they disappeared and nobody has seen them since. One of my cousins faced the same destiny when he was caught by a government force in 2006 and disappeared thereafter. I gave much attention to this issue in my book trying to clear up some of these facts to the Western world.

**Tyler:** How do the Iraqi people view Saddam Hussein, and what is their reaction to his being overthrown and ultimately put to death? The Western media depicted Iraqis rejoicing in the streets when the U.S. Troops reached Baghdad; was this depiction accurate?

**Issam:** In the beginning most Iraqis were happy to see the collapse of Saddam's regime, but there is still a great part of the Sunni community that received some privileges during Saddam's regime who complain about these changes.

Yes, the Western media depicted Iraqis rejoicing in the street, but for how long did they rejoice? It is the fifth year now since the invasion, and people are still complaining about the hard living, even the Shia now sigh for Saddam. I want to relate to you what I watched on one of the Egyptian T.V. channels a few months ago. There was an interview with an Iraqi university teacher and although he was from a Shia background and had been sentenced by Saddam to ten years, he regretted the end of Saddam and wished he had not been removed. Most Iraqis, and I am one of them, believed that handing Saddam to the hands of the Shia authority who hanged him, looked like a reward to Iran, and I became suspicious that there was a secret agreement between Iran and the U.S. to dismember Iraq and give it to Iran.

**Tyler:** Issam, how faithfully do you think the Western media depicts the war in Iraq?

**Issam:** I cannot say it is a false depiction, but it is not a complete image either. The Western media only describes the conflict in a simple way—a conflict between the U.S. and the terrorists, the Americans trying to build democracy and the enemy obstructing its way, the enemy being Al-Qaida or Iran...etc. The truth is much more complicated. In my book I try to highlight this intricate issue; it is an important fact that the American troops came to Iraq with very little information about the nature of Iraqi society, and that misunderstanding has led to agitating the conflict by provoking religious zeal.

**Tyler:** Issam, you mentioned above that the Iraqis do have Internet and TV—how in touch are they with the world outside Iraq? Do they get accurate depictions of worldwide affairs and American politics?

**Issam:** Yes, Iraqis show much enthusiasm to know about everything outside Iraq. You won't find any other people in the world so interested in following worldwide affairs. Especially considering that Iraqis now have new technologies enabling them to be in touch with the entire world. They are very thirsty to know everything, and they think they should make up for what information they could not receive in the past.

**Tyler:** In the book, it is clear you were constantly in fear while in Iraq. Will you describe some of the situations that made you uncomfortable?

**Issam:** There are many situations, but the worst was when I crossed the Iraqi border. It was 2pm and the American soldiers found something wrong so they besieged the area, aiming their guns toward passengers. Then I had to spend the night in a remote restaurant in the desert. The driver refused to move until daylight because the road was too dangerous and many armed gangs were ambushing people at the night.

**Tyler:** Once you arrived in Iraq, why did you stay for as long as three months?

**Issam:** It was less than three months. However, I thought I would be stuck forever inside Iraq because I could not find a safe way to get out, and the airplane flights were very difficult to get because there was a long list of passengers waiting their turn to fly. I did not want to use the same road I came in on because it was very dangerous, until I found another route that goes through northern Iraq into Syria.

**Tyler:** Issam, one issue Americans find difficult to understand is the religion of Islam. As someone who converted to Christianity, you have a better understanding of both religions. Will you share with us why you converted, and also explain the religious practices of Islam in Iraq?

**Issam:** Islam depend on rituals; there are specific rules you should follow to gratify God. Muslims must pray five times in a day, must pilgrimage to Mecca, must sacrifice some of their income etc. There is a list of duties that must be done, but no Muslim can tell you whether he is sure that he gratifies God or not, and the answer always is "only God knows." Christianity is different; I believe Jesus did not come to earth to create a new religion but to show us the image of God in his life and then to redeem us. Mercy, love, kindness, humbleness and compassion are all attributes that describe the nature of God. Believing in Christ means you build a relationship with God, and then you can see him in your soul, because He is a soul. Most of my life I was not inclined to Islam because I did not want to spend all my life praying and doing religious duties without knowing whether I gratified God or not.

In Christianity, God showed himself to me in the many miracles that happened me while I was in Jordan in 1995. In all my previous life, I kept wondering why God would give the Quran in a Shakespearean style language when uneducated people could not understand this high language but only repeat the verses like a parrot. This was one of the main obstacles that prevented me from believing in the Quran. But when I read the Bible for the first time, I found out it was written in a simple language, and Jesus was teaching people using proverbs to clarify meanings,

and he performed miracles to make people believe in him. Yes, I need a God who can act and respond when I ask him. I do not need a Shakespeare.

**Tyler:** When Americans read “Iraq Through a Bullet Hole,” what do you hope they will understand about the war?

**Issam:** I hope they will understand that Iraq today is not a place for a picnic and that even simple travel there is full of danger.

**Tyler:** Issam, if the situation in Iraq were better, would you return there? Do you think of it as your home still, or are you content with your new life in Australia?

**Issam:** Well, to be honest with you, I cannot make a good life in Australia. Yes, this country gave me a lot of things and I owe a great debt to it, but I came to Australia very late in life, and I feel that I left all my life behind in Iraq. Yes ...returning to Iraq is my big dream, but this depends on the situation in Iraq; I mean with any Islamic government (Sunni or Shia) life in Iraq would be like a hell to me.

**Tyler:** Do you think it is time for the American forces to leave Iraq?

**Issam:** Certainly not. To leave Iraq under the current circumstances would mean to give the country to Iran and Al-Qaida; if withdrawal of the U.S. troops was decided upon, it would be worse than the decision to invade Iraq because it would effect the entire Middle East and perhaps all the world. Iraq is a rich country and to put it in the hands of fanatic people would be a disaster.

I believe Iraqis want a plan for a scheduled withdrawal of American troops, and this can't be done in one month or a year; it is a moral duty that the U.S. prepare the way to build a democracy in Iraq before they leave, and this also can't be done with the current racist and religious Iraqi government. I believe if the U.S. could help the Iraqis choose a secular government that will be a great victory and much greater than any military victory.

**Tyler:** Issam, what do you personally think will be the future of Iraq? Will it become a democracy or revert back to rule by a dictator? Will it ever be stable or the people free from fear in the decades to come?

**Issam:** I think there is no way to return to dictatorship; yes it will be stable but that won't be in sight in one or two years; it can't be done by a magic touch; it is a long way off striving against the evil forces that oppose democracy.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Issam, for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they may find there about “Iraq Through a Bullet Hole: A Civilian Returns Home”?

**Issam:** My website address is [www.iraqthroughabullethole.com](http://www.iraqthroughabullethole.com). You can purchase my book there. I want to say that readers will find many facts in my book; there are many things I know about Iraq, but I did not mention them in my book because I wanted to relate only events that happened to me personally as a witness.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Issam, for the informative interview. I wish you much success with your book. I hope it creates a better understanding of the situation in Iraq and more compassion and help for the Iraqi people.