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Contextualizing the Plight of Iraqi Women

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Over the past decade, I have worked both as an academic and as an activist to document the various ways in which Iraqi women and gender relations have been changing in the context of political repression under the Baath regime, changing state policies towards women, a series of wars, as well as economic sanctions. In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I decided to build on this earlier work, extend the historical frame to include the period before the 35 years of the Baath regime (1968–2003), looking back to the transition from monarchy to republic (late 1940s through the revolution of 1958 to the early 1960s), and to deepen my understanding by interviewing almost 200 Iraqi women in London, Amman, Detroit, and San Diego.

The women I talked to were of different generations, varying ethnic and religious backgrounds: some were more secular, others more religious. I talked to those who have been politically active and those not, women associated with different political orientations and parties, professional women, housewives, mothers, etc. Yet, the majority of the women I talked to were educated middle class women of urban backgrounds. In terms of places of origin, most women I interviewed were from the capital, Baghdad, but I also spoke to women from other major cities and towns such as Basra, Najaf, Karbala, Mosul, Babylon, Kirkuk, Irbil, and Dohuk.

Plurality and difference

One of the many problems in the post-invasion era is the failure by many sections of society to acknowledge different experiences of the past, therefore alienating parts of the population who do not see themselves represented in a particular narrative. In reference to the present situation, I always feel uneasy when I hear people say: "Iraqi women think ..." or "Iraqi women want ..." generalizing from what is inevitably

A woman sits in her kitchen as an Iraqi soldier watches the street.

The fact that Iraqi women are living under abhorrent conditions often leads to generalized depictions of these women as faceless victims. The author draws attention to the stories and life-courses of individual Iraqi women, as these do not only give a human face to their plight, but also reveal how women have been further marginalized during the U.S. occupation. Set against this background it becomes understandable why so many Iraqi women are nostalgic for a past that was far from peaceful.

a wide variety of opinions, views, and visions. What arguably has emerged from my research, however, is that difference is historically based on a complex set of variables and can not simply be reduced to ethnicity and religion as is often construed nowadays.

The period after the first Baath coup (1963) is generally associated with increased political violence, greater sectarianism, and a reversal of progressive laws and reforms. Yet, many women I

interviewed spoke about the relative social freedom and cultural vibrancy during the rule of the Arif brothers (1963–68) and the early Baath period (1968–78). The experiences of these periods differ most significantly in terms of class and political orientation. Many secular and apolitical middle-class Shia, Sunni, Kurdish, and Christian women concurred in their appreciation of the achievements of the early Baath in education, modernization of infrastructures, and welfare provisions. However, the memories of those who were politically active in opposition to the regime are filled with accounts of political repression, mass arrests, torture, and executions. Yet, even some of those women who had first hand experiences of the regime's repressive practices retrospectively appreciate its developmental policies.

At the same time, accounts of Iraqi women reveal that an urban middle-class identity, especially the more cosmopolitan Baghdadi identity, continued to subsume ethnic and religious differences even throughout the period of the sanctions. In other words, a middle-class Shia family in Baghdad had more in common with its Sunni Arab and Kurdish middle-class neighbours in mixed neighbourhoods than the impoverished Shia living in Madina al-Thawra (renamed Saddam city and now called Sadr city), or the majority of Shia in the south. Indeed, Baghdadi families have frequently been multi-religious and multi-ethnic and mixed marriages amongst urban Baghdadi middle classes were quite common.

Since the late 1970s, differences on the lines of secular and Islamist political positions started to assume greater significance and influence women's experiences of the regime. Members or sympathizers of the Islamist Shia Da'wa party, for example, were targeted not so much because of their religious affiliation but because of their opposition to the regime and their aim to establish an Islamic state. Without wanting to diminish the suffering and hardship that members of the Shia Islamist opposition parties endured, the narrative about being the main recipients of state repression not only belittles the suffering of Kurds, but also other segments of the population, including those Sunni Arabs who actively resisted the regime.

Iraqi women and gender relations under the Baath regime

Based on a more in-depth reading of the previous regime's gender policies and its attitudes to the position of women in society, many Iraqi women

Image not available online

PHOTO BY DAMIR SAGOLJ / © REUTERS, 2007

gained in terms of socio-economic rights during the 1970s and 1980s within the general context of political repression. Living conditions improved for the majority of the population as the state relied not only on force and its power to control and co-opt, but also devised generous welfare programmes and opened up opportunities for investment and capital accumulation which were of great benefit to a large number of people within the expanding middle classes.

Yet, political repression, a series of wars, and the militarization of society seriously affected women, families, and gender relations, not only in terms of the loss of loved ones, but also in terms of a deteriorating economy, changing government policies, and shifting norms and increasingly conservative values surrounding women and gender. After the end of the war, and under the sanctions in the 1990s and early 2000s, a radical shift took place in terms of women's diminishing participation in the labour force, restricted access to education, inadequate healthcare, and other social services. Women were increasingly pushed back into their homes as unemployment rates sky-rocketed, the economy faltered, and the infrastructure collapsed.

Developments since 2003

Every-day survival is a priority in a context where lack of security goes side by side with incredibly difficult living conditions. The Iraqi infrastructure, which was already severely debilitated as a result of economic sanctions and a series of wars, has deteriorated even further since 2003. Electricity shortages, lack of access to potable water, malfunctioning sanitation systems, and a deteriorating health system are part of every-day lives in post-2003 Iraq. Intisar K., who works as a doctor in a teaching hospital in Baghdad, summed up what has also been documented in several UN-related documents: "We only have electricity for three to a maximum of five hours a day. There is not enough clean drinking water. Lack of sanitation is a big problem and continues to be one of the main causes of malnutrition, dysentery, and death amongst young children."

It is not only lack of electricity, clean water, and petrol that affects the every-day lives of Iraqi civilians. According to recent reports published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the British-based charity organization Medact, the 2003 invasion and ongoing occupation has led to the deterioration of health conditions, including malnutrition, rise in vaccine-preventable diseases, and mortality rates for children under five. Iraq's mortality rate for children under five rose from 5 percent in 1990 to 12.5 percent in 2004.¹ Similar to the humanitarian crisis during the sanctions period, women suffer particularly as they are often the last ones to eat after feeding their children and husbands. But they are also having to stand by as their often sick and malnourished children do not obtain adequate health care.

Despite incredibly difficult circumstances, Iraqi women have been at the forefront of trying to cope with and improve the exceedingly difficult living conditions and humanitarian crisis since 2003. There has been a flourishing of locally based women's initiatives and groups, mainly revolving around practical needs related to widespread poverty, lack of adequate health care, lack of housing, and lack of proper social services provided by the state. Women have also pooled their resources to help address the need for education and training, such as computer classes, as well as income generating projects. Many of the initiatives filling the gap in terms of state provisions where welfare and health are concerned are related to political parties and religiously motivated organizations and groups. However, independent non-partisan professional women have also been mobilizing to help.

Violence against women

While aerial bombings of residential areas are responsible for a large number of civilian deaths, many Iraqis have lost their lives while being shot at by American or British troops. Whole families have been wiped out as they were approaching a checkpoint or did not recognize areas marked as prohibited. In addition to the killing of innocent women, men, and children, the occupation forces have also been engaged in other forms of violence against women. There have been numerous documented accounts about physical assaults at checkpoints, and during house searches. Several women I talked to reported that they had been verbally or physically threatened and assaulted by soldiers as they were searched at checkpoints. American forces have also arrested wives, sisters, and daughters of suspected insurgents in order to pressure them to surrender.² Female relatives have been literally taken

hostage by U.S. forces and used as bargaining chips. Aside from the violence related to the arrests itself, those women who were detained by the troops might suffer as well from the sense of shame associated with such a detention. As there has been mounting evidence not just of physical assaults and torture but also of rape; women who have been detained might even become victims of so-called honour crimes.

Islamist militants and terrorist groups also pose a particular danger to Iraqi women. Many women's organizations and activists inside Iraq have documented the increasing Islamist threats to women, the pressure to conform to certain dress codes, the restrictions in movement and behaviour, incidents of acid thrown into women's faces, and even targeted killings. Early on in 2003, many women in Basra, for example, reported that they were forced to wear a headscarf or restrict their movements in fear of harassment from men. Female students at the University of Basra reported that since the war ended groups of men began stopping them at the university gates, shouting at them if their heads were not covered.³

Not only students, but also women of all ages and walks of life are nowadays forced to comply to certain dress codes as well as restrict their movement. Suad F., a former accountant and mother of four children who lives in a neighbourhood in Baghdad that used to be relatively mixed before the sectarian killings in 2005 and 2006 was telling me during a visit to Amman in 2006: "I resisted for a long time, but last year also started wearing hijab, after I was threatened by several Islamist militants in front of my house. They are terrorizing the whole neighbourhood, behaving as if they were in charge. And they are actually controlling the area. No one dares to challenge them. A few months ago they distributed leaflets around the area warning people to obey them and demanding that women should stay at home."

By 2007, the threat posed by Islamist militias as well as the mushrooming Islamist extremist groups goes far beyond imposed dress codes and calls for gender segregation at university. Despite—or even partly because of the U.S. and UK rhetoric about liberation and women's rights—women have been pushed back even more into the background and into their homes. Women, who have a public profile either as doctors, academics, lawyers, NGO activists, or politicians, are systematically threatened and have become targets for assassinations. Criminal gangs increase the general "climate of fear" by kidnapping women for ransom as well as to sexually abuse them and to traffic young women outside of Iraq to sell them into prostitution.

Conclusion

If views of history are by definition directed towards the past, analyzing how history is constructed and used reveals as much about the present, as I show in my book, *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*. In the context of the aftermath of the invasion in 2003, the escalating violence and sectarian tensions, contestations about power and national identity, history becomes a very important and powerful tool. Contesting narratives about what happened in the past relate directly to different attitudes towards the present and visions about the future of the new Iraq. They relate to claims about rights, about resources, and about power. More crucially, the different accounts of the past lay down the parameters of what it means to be Iraqi, who is to be included, and who is to be excluded. History justifies and contains both narratives of unity and narratives of divisions and sectarianism. Given the current devastation and continuous deterioration of living conditions inside Iraq, it might not be so surprising that many women look at their past with great nostalgia even if their memories are filled with political repression, wars, and economic hardship.

Notes

1. See http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iraq_statistics.html and http://www.medact.org/content/wmd_and_conflict/Medact%20Iraq%202004.pdf.
2. Those suspected of being involved in both the resistance as well as in terrorist activities are regularly detained without informing their families about their whereabouts and their wellbeing. People disappearing, random arrests, as well as torture and abuse in prisons are ironically common phenomena in post-Saddam Iraq.
3. "Iraq: Female Harassment from Religious Conservatives," *IRINNews.org*, 14 April 2004.

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