

The Middle East at SOAS

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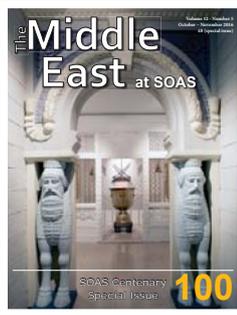


Image of the Inner sanctum of a Zoroastrian fire temple modelled on the front entrance of the Manekji Navroji Seth fire temple, Mumbai, for *The Everlasting Flame, Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination* exhibition held in the Brunei Gallery, SOAS from 11 October to 14 December 2013 ©SOAS, University of London

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The Middle East in London

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The London Middle East Institute (LMEI) draws upon the resources of London and SOAS to provide teaching, training, research, publication, consultancy, outreach and other services related to the Middle East. It serves as a neutral forum for Middle East studies broadly defined and helps to create links between individuals and institutions with academic, commercial, diplomatic, media or other specialisations.

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EVENTS IN LONDON

Nadje Al-Ali explains how a gender lens can deepen our understanding of war and conflict in the Middle East

Gender, power and violence



© Burak Kara/Getty Images

Man uses his belt to attack soldiers after the failed coup in Turkey on 15-16 July 2016. Photograph by Burak Kara/Getty Images. Courtesy of the photographer

One of the many shocking images of the failed military coup in Turkey was that of a young, bearded man in civilian clothes, draped in the red Turkish flag, using his belt to beat a group of young soldiers who are lying on the ground huddled up against each other. Heavily armed policemen appear to be watching the spectacle without intervening. Several sources have reported brutal attacks on military conscripts, many barely 18 years old, even after they had already surrendered. Some video clips suggest that policemen have threatened to rape the daughters and wives of captured soldiers.

These incidents are a stark reminder of the complex ways violence plays out in conflict situations. But they also tell us a lot about underlying gendered norms and power relations. Prevailing notions of

masculinities, promoted and embodied by the militarised Turkish state, articulate strength and authority through force rather than democratic legal means. Throughout his rule as the former Prime Minister and now President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has heavily played on his image as the über-patriarch, tasked to protect the honour and unity of the nation. This 'protection' has frequently translated into oppressing religious and ethnic minorities as well as political dissidents. At the same time, Erdoğan has left no doubt that, in his world view, women are not equal to men. On numerous occasions, he has referred to the idea of gender equality

and challenges to heteronormativity, as campaigned for by feminists and LGBTQ activists inside Turkey, as a foreign conspiracy.

Political scientists, international relations scholars and historians often focus on what we think of as 'the big picture' when analysing war and conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere. The majority of discussions in the media and policy circles revolve around national security concerns, changes in political economies and state-society relations. What a gendered lens adds to the picture is not only the recognition that women and men might be affected

Attention to gender as a structural feature of inequality opens up our research enquiries into exploring the ways that gender might intersect with other power hierarchies

Women and men are mobilising jointly, particularly amongst the youth, to resist violence against women as an integral part of their demands for democracy and dignity

by and implicated in war and conflict differently, but also that there exists a continuum of violence in terms of what is happening at home, within the family, the workplace, the streets and situations of acute armed conflicts, including battle fronts. Moreover, attention to gender as a structural feature of inequality that cuts through world politics, state institutions, economic contexts, social and legal arenas and daily lives, also opens up our research enquiries into exploring the ways that gender might intersect with other power hierarchies.

For example, in Iraq I explored the ways in which being an Iraqi woman or man might intersect with being of a particular social class and a specific religious sect or ethnic group at any given historical moment: during the Ba'ath regime, the economic sanctions period, the invasion, the occupation, or more recent sectarian tensions and political struggles. In relation to my work on the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, I found that power differences linked to being a man or a woman need to be explored in conjunction with ethnicity (Turk/Kurd) as well as religious differences, particularly in relation to the Alevi minority. Different forms of violence intersect; many Kurdish feminist activists stress that their struggle against state violence goes side by side with their struggle against gender-based violence, including that at the hands of fellow Kurdish men.

Cutting across any specific empirical context is the fact that women and children are disproportionately impacted by war, conflict and forced displacement. An increase in sexual and wider gender-based violence, restrictions on mobility, limited access to healthcare and the feminisation of poverty are common, gendered aspects of war. Since the start of the Syrian conflict early marriage, forced marriages, forced prostitution, sexual violence, and the demand for maternal and wider reproductive healthcare have increased greatly.

Meanwhile, women's behaviour and appearance are both considered to be symbolic of the national, religious and ethnic community. Women, then, are often the target of legal or informal

mechanisms or even physical violence with the aim of imposing dress codes, controlling sexual behaviour and limiting access to the public sphere, all in the name of 'restoring authentic values'. In reality these actions demarcate boundaries of 'us vs them' and consolidate the authority of specific political actors or attempts to 'break' the opposition. This trend was particularly obvious in the Iraqi case: sectarian struggles were very much fought over the bodies, dress codes and mobility of women.

The impact of recent political transformations in the Middle East on women and men, on women's rights and gender norms has been varied according to national contexts, respective histories of state feminism and gender activism, as well as differences among and between women and men based on class, citizenship status and place of residence, amongst other social differences. In general, mass protests and uprisings created new openings for women's involvement in public, however, these were rapidly threatened by armed conflict, counter-revolutionary backlashes as well as the empowerment of Islamist political forces seeking to promote their conservative gender agendas as part of signalling a break from former regimes. In the struggle for political power, women's bodies, but also increasingly men's bodies and their sexuality, have become the targets of violence and control by a range of actors seeking to 'break



the will' of those advocating change while simultaneously consolidating their authority.

Gender studies has long moved away from essentialised ideas about men as perpetrators and women as victims of violence and has been engaging in studies that look at agency, resistance, complexities and complicities. Current research indicates that despite what generally is a gloomy picture, there have been significant developments on the societal level. Women survivors of violence are speaking out publicly and breaking the taboo surrounding the discussion of sexual abuse and harassment. Moreover, women and men are mobilising jointly, particularly amongst the youth, to resist violence against women as an integral part of their demands for democracy and dignity. Men, especially young men, are increasingly making the connection between state authoritarianism and prevailing patriarchal gender regimes. And those men opposed to political authoritarianism in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt and elsewhere in the region have also started to realise that the struggle for gender-based equality lies at the heart of struggles for more egalitarian and democratic societies.

Nadje Al-Ali is Professor of Gender Studies at the Centre for Gender Studies at SOAS and a member of the magazine's Editorial Board