

A Feminist Perspective on the Iraq War

by Nadjie Al-Ali

Introduction

As I revise this article in the beginning of 2010, Iraq and the Iraq war rarely make the headlines anymore. Most of the world has moved on. Meanwhile, back in the headlines are Afghanistan and a war that was supposedly won a long time ago. From my perspective as a transnational feminist with family connections in Iraq and the Iraqi diaspora, the so-called war on terror has not only been disastrous in terms of its devastating impact on the populations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the infrastructures and quality of lives, and a drastic deterioration of women's rights despite the rhetoric of democracy and women's rights, but it has also led to new rifts and fragmentations in antiwar movements on the one hand and feminist movements on the other. In this brief contribution, I will not engage in an academic discussion about feminist resistance in the global war on terror and against imperialism but will rather engage in a reflection on my often uncomfortable positionality as a transnational feminist antimilitarist suspicious of dichotomous narratives and mono-causal explanations.

This positionality is linked even if it cannot be reduced to my background as a German-Iraqi who has lived in both "the West" (Germany, the U.S and the U.K.) as well as the Middle East (Egypt). As a child and teenager, I regularly visited my family in Baghdad and continued to do so, if less frequently, when I started university. My father had left Iraq in 1958, long before the Ba'th or Saddam Hussein came to power. He travelled in order to study in Germany and only ended up staying after marrying my German mother. So unlike most of my friends and the Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers I got to know over the years, who were not able to go back as long as Saddam Hussein was still in power, we were able to go to see our relatives every so often during holidays. On one of my trips to Iraq in July and August of 1990, my father and I were trapped on the way out because of the invasion of Kuwait. My last journey to Baghdad was in 1997, when economic sanctions had already left an ugly mark on society (Al-Ali, 2007: 6).

This last visit was a turning point in my personal, professional and political life. As so many other second generation Iraqis living abroad, it was the increasing recognition of the human suffering inside Iraq, triggered by political repression, wars and economic sanc-

WORKS AND DAYS 57/58: Vol. 29, 2011

tions, that pushed me to a closer relationship with the country my father had left almost five decades before. I was humbled by my cousins, who did not appear to envy my ability to come and go, spending my Easter or summer holidays for family visits to Baghdad but then being able to leave the country while they had to stay behind. Nor did I sense any resentment of my privileges and freedoms, having been able to travel to many places and having obtained an education in Germany, the U.S., Egypt and the U.K. Instead I felt that my cousins, at least those closest to me in age, appeared to be curious about my life, and, to my great astonishment, genuinely happy for me. It was during that last trip to Baghdad in 1997, as I saw how the country's infrastructure had deteriorated beyond belief, in addition to the ongoing political repression, that I promised myself to use my freedom, my education, and my skills more purposefully. I wanted to increase public consciousness not only about what had been happening to Iraqi women, but also to Iraqi society at large (ibid. 6-7).

Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq

Initially, my focus was the devastating impact of economic sanctions, while always recognizing and stressing the dreadful impact of the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein.

I started to document the various ways in which Iraqi women and gender relations have been changing in the context of political repression under the Ba'th regime, changing state policies towards women, and a series of wars as well as economic sanctions. In addition to informal interviews with family and friends during my visit to Iraq during the sanctions period, I also interviewed a number of Iraqi women refugees who had left the country during the 1990s.

During this period I found a political home and safe space with Women in Black London—part of a worldwide network of women campaigning against war and violence and for peace with justice. I am greatly indebted to the numerous women who have long years of experience in women's rights and peace activism and whose politics and analyses were analysis devoid of easy slogans and polemics. I was also involved in the British based antisansctions movement, but I often felt uncomfortable with the frequent apologetic tone in terms of Hussein's regime. Many of my Iraqi friends shared the frustration and anger of some of the antisansctions groups and individual activists, who in the process of condemning British and American policies on Iraq—particularly the sanctions—often glorified the Ba'th regime and dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Trying to articulate a more nuanced political position, a group of like-minded Iraqi and British women established an organisation in 2000. Initially we called it "Act Together: Women against Sanctions on Iraq." We spent the first couple of years trying to educate people in Britain and other western countries about the devastating impact of economic sanctions on the Iraqi population. We focused particularly on the humanitarian crisis's impact on women, whether through increased social conservatism or more restrictive gender norms. Aside from the most obvious and devastating effects of economic

sanctions—related to dramatically increased child mortality rates, widespread malnutrition, deteriorating health care and general infrastructure as well as unprecedented poverty and an economic crisis—women particularly were hit by a changing social climate. The breakdown of the welfare state had a disproportionate effect on women, who had been its main beneficiaries. State discourse and policies as well as social attitudes and gender ideologies shifted dramatically during the sanctions period (Al-Ali, 2007: 171-213).

Since late 2001, we widened our focus and started to campaign against a U.S./U.K. invasion of Iraq. From the beginning, we made it clear that we opposed both the repressive

Ba'ath regime and U.S./U.K. policies on Iraq. The latter resulted in the most comprehensive sanctions in history (1990-2003) and continuous bombing campaigns (1991-2003) before the 2003 invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq. In addition to raising consciousness about women's issues in Iraq, organising meetings and participating in numerous events, we collected materials for a women's studies library in Baghdad, raised funds for individual women and women's organizations in Iraq, and campaigned with women's rights activists.

From March 8-28, 2003, we mounted an exhibition called "Our Life in Pieces: Objects and Stories from Iraqis in Exile" at the Diorama Gallery in central London. It had taken almost a year to plan and organize the exhibition. Our main motivation at the time was to dispel the idea that Iraq can be equated with Saddam Hussein. Before 2003, hardly anyone ever talked about Iraqis as ordinary human beings with fears, hopes and aspirations. The long process of putting together the exhibit was documented on our exhibition leaflet and our website (www.acttogether.org):

We issued an invitation to Iraqis in exile to contribute objects which held a particular meaning for them: repositories of personal, familial and social memory and history; emblems, talismans, anything they wanted to exhibit which had some connection with Iraq. The invitation was published in Arabic language newspapers, read out on the radio and left in community centres.

Initially, women seemed more willing to contribute objects and write their personal accounts than men, who often said they hadn't brought anything with them. We also had to work hard to gain people's trust. The painful recent history of the country has left Iraqis very wary. Once this barrier was crossed, however, they became intrigued and enthusiastic and, up to the opening of the exhibition, people were still contacting us, wanting to bring in their objects and stories. In the end, we had about 75 exhibits.

We decided against a selection process or any externally imposed thematic principle and this collection of objects is a random one where people are speaking only for themselves. And yet, we feel that this exhibition finally conjures up a strong sense of place and the individual experience and history of some of its people. Some exhibits have been chosen because they express a connection to family or childhood. Others embody moments in

the country's political or cultural history, which have been significant for the object's owner and helped to form part of his or her identity. Some people contributed thoughts, such as the card saying this exhibition should be called 'Fear'. And several men chose to display their military service books, probably the most important document Iraqi men possess. All men are called up aged 18 and if a man fails to do his military service he will be imprisoned and, in times of war, executed. The reasons people chose to participate were varied, but in all the objects and their stories you sense something of the way we all construct a sense of identity out of the fragments of memory and experience. <http://www.acttogether.org/exhibition.htm>

The opening of the exhibition in March 2003 coincided with the invasion of Iraq. The exhibition became a gathering point for many Iraqis who feared for their relatives' and friends' lives. We felt incredibly helpless, sad and angry, but we also knew that we were making a very small contribution by reminding people in Britain that a military intervention affected real people in Iraq as well as people living in the diaspora.

Complicating the Story

In the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi invasion, I was asked to write a book about its impact and the occupation on women in Iraq. Although it was a compelling idea, I felt uncomfortable writing about the contemporary situation without providing historical context. I feared that a book about the devastating impact of the occupation could all too easily be construed as "just another Muslim country oppressing its women." I felt that readers needed a modern history of Iraqi women that would challenge the widespread views about the "backwardness" of Iraqi society and inherent oppression of Iraqi women. I also wanted to challenge the notion that it was Islam, Muslim or Middle Eastern culture that was to be blamed for social injustice, increased conservatism and a deterioration of women's rights.

I therefore decided to build on my earlier work on the impact of wars, dictatorship and economic sanctions on Iraqi women, and I decided to extend my historical frame to include the period before the 35 years of the Ba'th regime (1968-2003). I looked back to the transition from monarchy to republic (from the late 1940s through the revolution of 1958 to the early 1960s), and I wanted to deepen my understanding by interviewing almost 200 Iraqi women in London, Amman, Erbil, Sulamaniya, Detroit and San Diego. I published my findings in *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present* (2007, Zed Books).

Without ever wanting to diminish the magnitude of the crimes and atrocities committed by the previous regime, my research suggests that a closer and more nuanced analysis is needed to comprehend the various ways the former state impacted on women, gender relations and society more generally. This is not only because state poli-

cies towards women were complex and often contradictory, but also because the Ba'ath regime itself radically changed both its rhetoric and policies towards women in response to changing economic, social and political conditions on the ground. However limited and driven by pragmatic considerations, the regime's initial policies of pushing women into the public sphere, especially in the educational system and the labour force, certainly had an impact on the position of women in society and on relations between men and women. This was particularly the case within the expanding urban middle-classes, but even women of other socio-economic backgrounds benefited from literacy programmes, improved health care and welfare provisions during the 1960s and 70s (Al-Ali, 2007: 109-146).

From 1968 to the late 1980s, the Iraqi state attempted to shift patriarchal power away from fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, and uncles in order to make itself the main patriarch and patron of the country. Many middle-class men and women welcomed the relatively progressive social policies of the state that continued while the economy prospered. Yet, amongst the more religious and conservative forces in Iraqi society, such as tribal leaders and Islamists, there was considerable resentment at the state's attempt to interfere in people's traditions and sense of propriety. The limitations of "state feminism," i.e., the easy reversal of reforms and changes imposed from above, became apparent as conditions on the ground changed. The historically ambivalent position towards women, as educated workers on the one hand and mothers of future citizens on the other, was acutely apparent during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), when Iraqi women were expected to be "superwomen." They had to contribute in even greater numbers to swell the ranks of the depleted labour force, the civil service and all public institutions while men were fighting at the front. At the same time, women were pressured to produce more children—ideally five children, according to Saddam Hussein—and contribute to the war effort by providing future generations of Iraqi soldiers (*ibid.*).

During the 1980s, the regime used women increasingly to demarcate boundaries between communities and carry the heavy burden of honour in a society that was becoming more and more militarized. Their bodies increasingly became the site of nationalist policies and battles. Iraqi men were encouraged to divorce their "Iranian wives" during the war with Iran. On the other hand, Iraqi Arab men were encouraged to marry Kurdish women as part of the regime's Arabization policies in the north. At the same time, Islamist, Kurdish nationalist, communist and other women affiliated with political opposition were tortured and sexually abused, humiliating not only the women but "dishonouring" their male relatives as well (*ibid.* 263).

After the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Gulf War and the uprisings in 1991, there was a radical shift from Saddam Hussein's previous policies of centralization and suppression of tribal powers. Weakened by another war and a deteriorating economy, one of Saddam Hussein's strategies to maintain power was to encourage tribalism and revive the power of loyal tribal leaders. Central to the co-option of tribal leaders and a bargaining chip to obtain loyalty

was the issue of women and women's rights. The regime accepted tribal practices and customs, such as so-called "honour" killings, in return for loyalty (ibid. pp.171-213).

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 in terms of a deteriorating economy, changing government policies, shifting norms, and increasingly conservative values surrounding women and gender. After the war's end, and under the sanctions of 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 (ibid. 266-267).

Women were clearly pushed back into traditional roles as mothers and housewives. From being the highest in the region, estimated to be above 23% prior to 1991, women's employment rate fell to only 10% in 1997, as reported by the UNDP in 2000 (UNDP, 2000). Monthly salaries in the public sector, which had been increasingly staffed by women since the Iran-Iraq war, dropped dramatically and did not keep pace with high inflation rates and the cost of living. Many women reported that they simply could not afford to work anymore since the state had to withdraw its free services, including childcare and transportation (Al-Ali, 2005).

Teenage girls and young women in their twenties and thirties frequently referred to the changes related to socializing, family ties, and relations between neighbours and friends. Often a parent or older relative was quoted as stating how things were different from the past when socializing played a much bigger role in people's lives. Zeinab, a fifteen-year-old girl from Baghdad, spoke about the lack of trust between people. On the change in dress code for women and the social restrictions she and her peers experience constantly, she said:

People have changed now because of the increasing economic and various other difficulties of life in Iraq. They have become very afraid of each other. I think because so many people have lost their jobs and businesses, they are having loads of time to speak about other people's lives, and they often interfere in each other's affairs. I also think that because so many families are so poor now that they cannot afford buying more than the daily basic food, it becomes so difficult for them to buy nice clothes and nice things and, therefore, it is better to wear *hijab*. Most people are somewhat pressured to change their lives in order to protect themselves from the gossip of other people—especially talk about family honour (Al-Ali & Hussein, 2003: 46).

The fears related to a woman's reputation may have been aggravated by the occurrence of so-called "honour killings" during and after the sanctions period. Saddam Hussein, in an attempt to main-

tain legitimacy after the Gulf War by appeasing conservative patriarchal constituencies, brought in anti-woman legislation such as a 1990 presidential decree granting immunity to men who committed honour crimes. Fathers and brothers of women who are known or often merely suspected of having violated the accepted codes of behaviour, especially with respect to keeping their virginity before marriage, may kill the women in order to restore the honour of the family. Despite the fact that the law was abrogated after only two months without naming specific reasons, knowledge about the existence of honour killings worked as a deterrent for many Iraqi women and teenagers. Others might have been less worried about the most dramatic consequences of "losing one's reputation." For educated, middle-class women from urban areas, it was not so much honour crimes they feared as diminished marriage prospects.

The most obvious signs of this shift towards greater social conservatism where women and gender relations are concerned were the changed dress code (many girls and women started to wear *hijab*), restrictions in mobility and public spaces for socializing in mixed gender settings, and an overall shift towards more traditional gender roles. Sanctions also changed class differences in Iraqi society as it led to the impoverishment of a previously broad and educated middle class at the same time as it allowed a new class of *nouveau riche* war and sanctions profiteers to emerge (Al-Ali, 2007: 201-205).

I have on many occasions lamented the widespread amnesia with respect to the impact of economic sanctions. There is a tendency to write out of history the devastating impact of the most comprehensive sanctions system ever imposed on a country. Again, I do not want to suggest that everything was fine prior to the sanctions period, but to stress that dramatic changes with respect to women's position in society, social values and living conditions were characteristic of the 1990s. Seen against the current situation in post-2003 Iraq, the changes and developments triggered by sanctions and changing state policies provide the most immediate context and background to the current situation. It is a measure of the desperate straits to which the country has been reduced over the past four years that many Iraqi women now refer even to the sanctions period in nostalgic terms and compare it favourably with the current situation (ibid., pp. 171-213).

The Enemy of My Enemy

Political rifts had started to widen in the run up to the invasion. In terms of feminist movements, a small but significant number of imperialist feminists, mainly based in the US but also elsewhere, were promoting military intervention in Afghanistan and also Iraq in order to bring freedom to Muslim women. A similar strand existed amongst Iraqi women's rights activists, some of which had started to gain public recognition and funding in the aftermath of 9/11. To be fair, some of these women appear to have seriously believed that military intervention was the only way to get rid of Saddam Hussein, while others were clearly opportunistically jumping on the band wagon, hoping for future access to resources and positions in Iraq in the af-

termath of an invasion. Those of us opposing the invasion of Iraq and the so-called war on terror more widely often felt sidelined and unfairly discredited as Saddam lovers.

But within the antiwar movement, political rifts also started to impact on former alliances. Although many friends with whom I had been politically involved in antisanctions and antiwar activism agreed that the so-called “war on terror” cannot be fought with bombs, only few seemed to acknowledge that neither can we fight U.S. imperialism with violence. This is particularly the case where most of the victims of this violence are innocent civilians. In Iraq, for example, thousands of men, women and children have been killed since the invasion just because they happen to be passing by or waiting at a petrol station, a market, a mosque, in front of a police station or a street at the wrong time. Could we call the killing of Iraqi civilians, foreign humanitarian workers—and, I would add, Iraqi police recruits—resistance? For me, the idea that these killings were a necessary if regrettable “by-product” of the fight against imperialism appeared as twisted and perverse as the infamous statement by Madeline Albright that the deaths of thousands of Iraqi children over economic sanctions and in the attempt to contain Saddam Hussein were “a price worth paying.”

To make it very clear: in my activism and writings, I have been antisanctions, antiwar and anti-occupation. But being against these things never meant automatically being for someone or something else. That held true for the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in the past as well as for those fighters traumatizing the Iraqi population over the past years. What I have found so disheartening and frustrating when participating in many antiwar and anti-occupation events during the past years has been a polarized depiction of the world and a lack of clarity where the Iraqi resistance is concerned. At the World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul in 2005, for example, almost every speaker either began or finished his or her talk with a similar statement: “We have to support the Iraqi resistance!” Many speakers added that this was not just a matter of fighting the occupation inside Iraq but part of a wider struggle against encroaching neocolonialism, neoliberalism and imperialism. But none of the speakers explained to the jury of conscience, the audience and their fellow speakers what they actually meant by “the resistance.”

No one felt it was necessary to differentiate between, on the one hand, the right of self-defence and the patriotic attempt to resist foreign occupation and, on the other, the unlawful indiscriminate killings of noncombatants. Neither did anyone question the motivations and goals of many of the numerous groups, networks, individuals and gangs grouped all too casually under “the resistance”—a term that through lack of clear definition has been used to encompass various forms of non-violent political oppositions, armed resistance, guerrilla combat and mafia-type criminality. Again, by failing to explicitly define and differentiate, proponents of the unconditional support slogan end up grouping together the large part of the Iraqi population opposing U.S. occupation and engaging in everyday forms of resistance, with remnants of the previous regime, Iraqi-based Islamist militias, foreign *ihadis*, mercenaries, and criminals.

Views about armed resistance have varied greatly amongst the Iraqi population reflecting the diversity of Iraqi society, not simply in terms of religious and ethnic backgrounds, as many commentators would like us to believe, but among social class, place of residence, specific experiences with the previous regime and the ongoing occupation, and political orientation. However, based on talks with friends and family inside as well as various opinion polls, I would argue that most Iraqis did not translate their opposition to the occupation into support for militant insurgents killing Iraqis. I also found it hard to believe that the majority of Iraqis would actually support kidnapping, torturing and killing foreign workers, journalists and NGO activists, whatever their origin.

Ironically, it was the lack of security on Iraqi city streets over the past years that persuaded many people, who in principle wanted U.S. and British forces out of their country, not to ask for an immediate withdrawal. Obviously, a lack of security is an effect of the recent war and the ongoing occupation. And to be clear: I don't perceive the withdrawal of combat troops to signal an end of the occupation, given that over 30,000 troops are still based inside Iraq and that the American embassy in Baghdad is bigger than Vatican City, able to accommodate about 4,000 people. What we see today is without doubt a brutal continuation of an illegal war, one in which thousands of civilians already have been killed and maimed through numerous conventional and unconventional weapons. U.S. and U.K. troops have been involved in the systematic torture of prisoners and committed other violations of international human rights conventions and humanitarian law. Iraqis have been leaving home in the morning during some of the worst years of violence, wondering whether they will see their loved ones again; a sniper or bomb from the occupation forces or a suicide bomber could be who kills them. To abuse an old cliché, Iraqis have been caught between many rocks and many hard places.

The culture of violence and the underlying fascist ideology of many groups operating on Iraqi soil since the 2003 invasion do not provide viable alternatives to U.S. imperialism. While we all know that Bush is not about freedom and democracy, I have also urged fellow activists in the antiwar movement to stop calling local and foreign suicide bombers "freedom fighters." I am not sure how long most of those unconditionally supporting the resistance would have lasted inside Iraq if the militant insurgents responsible for killing and kidnapping Iraqi civilians and foreigners would have actually prevailed.

There is no doubt that the previous Coalition Provisional Authority and the various transitional governments have lacked credibility amongst the majority of the Iraqi population. Reconstruction has been incredibly slow and fraught with corruption and ill-management. Yet, genuine political transformation, the rebuilding of physical and political spaces, and a nonviolent opposition to foreign occupation have been made impossible by the increasing violence and instability caused by the insurgents. And there are nonviolent ways of resisting: continuous images of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of Iraqis—men, women and children of all ages and

backgrounds—demonstrating peacefully on the streets of Iraq would send a very forceful message across the world, a message that could not be ignored by Washington and London, especially if Iraqis were joined by people from all over the world who took to the streets in solidarity.

At the same time Iraqis, lobbying their own government—as flawed as the process of election was—through civil society associations, city councils, and other institutions, can resist foreign encroachment and the imposition of outside political actors, values and economic systems. At the grassroots level, Iraqis did start to group together, mobilize and resist nonviolently, and they continue to do so. Women activists have been at the forefront of these actions and initiatives, such as Iraqi Women's Will (IWW), Knowledge for Women in Iraqi Society (KWIS), and the Iraqi Women's Network, an umbrella organization of over 80 groups working on humanitarian and income-generating projects who are also often involved in lobbying. Yet, the political spaces have been shrinking, not simply as a function of ongoing occupation and the type of government in place, but also, and crucially, because of insecurity caused by violent insurgents.

For those of us concerned about the erosion of women's rights inside Iraq, Islamist militants pose a particular danger. Many women's organisations and activists inside Iraq have documented the increasing attacks on women, the pressure to conform to certain dress codes, the restrictions in movement and behaviour, the incidents of acid thrown into women's faces—and even the killings. It is extremely short-sighted for anyone not to condemn these types of attacks, but for women this becomes existential. Women and their have, of course, been instrumentalized, both in Afghanistan and Iraq. We know that both Bush and Blair tried to co-opt the language of democracy and human rights, especially women's rights. But their instrumentalizing women did not—and still does not—mean that we should condone or accept the way Islamist militants are, for their part, using women symbolically and attacking them physically to express their resistance.

Over the past years, I have been arguing that we need to be much clearer about what we should support and what we should not. We need to abandon the unconditional support of those in Iraq, including Iraqis, responsible for the killing of civilians. We need to acknowledge that Iraqis are divided along many different lines and that glossing over these differences does not help national unity in the long run. And, as I have argued many times, we need to seriously look for nonviolent means to resist the occupation in Iraq and wider U.S. imperialism, recognizing that the enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. Act Together: Women's Action on Iraq (re-named after the invasion of Iraq) continues to present that safe political space from which a more nuanced position can be articulated. I have also found it continuously in the messages on banners during Women in Black vigils.

What Kind of Liberation?

More recently, I have been focusing, with my friend and colleague Nicola Pratt, on the impact of the recent invasion and the ongoing occupation. We published *What Kind of Liberation: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (University of California Press, 2009). In our book, we discuss how women in Iraq have fared since the Ba'ath regime's 2003 fall. Official rhetoric puts Iraqi women at centre stage, but we show that in reality women's rights and women's lives have been exploited in the name of competing political agendas. We also challenge the widespread view—even amongst progressive antiwar and peace activists—that something inherent in Muslim, Middle Eastern or Iraqi culture is responsible for the escalating violence and systematic erosion of women's rights. We argue that it is not Islam or culture that has pushed Iraqi women back into their homes. Instead, we blame concrete and rapidly changing political, economic, and social conditions as well as a wide range of national, regional and international actors. If one looks more closely at Iraqi women's historical participation in public life, their achievements in education, their contribution to the work force and the overall social climate, one finds that, in many ways, conditions were actually better for women in the past than now (Al-Ali, & Pratt, 2009a). However, as we argue:

Yet far from being passive victims, Iraqi women continue to negotiate the challenges of the war and occupation and to find strategies for resisting and adapting to events as these unfold. Through interviews with women's rights activists, women doctors, lawyers, teachers, members of NGOs, politicians and parliamentarians, we document the rich and varied scope of Iraqi women's involvement in political transition, reconstruction and attempts at shaping "the new Iraq." We move beyond simplistic representations of Iraqi women either as victims or as heroines. They are both, and a lot more in between. Some women might have more opportunities to survive, adapt and resist than others. We are suspicious of sweeping statements like: "Iraqi women think . . ." or "Iraqi women want . . ." Like women anywhere else in the world, Iraqi women are not all the same. Moreover, difference in this context is not merely a matter of a woman being Shi'i, Sunni or Christian, Arab or Kurd. Aside from the fact that there are many other religious and ethnic groups in Iraq, difference derives much more from social class, educational and professional background, place of residence, experiences of the previous regime, political orientation and attitude towards religion (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009a: 2).

Questions arise from the polarized positions of pro- and antiwar forces: Can we ask for women's rights in the context of a military occupation? Or in the struggle against war and occupation must women's rights take a back seat? For many antiwar and anti-occupation activists the latter appears to be the case. We have examined this question in greater detail while simultaneously asking whether

the struggle for women's rights means abandoning criticism of imperialism. In the course of our research and our antiwar activism, we have come across international and Iraqi feminists who shy away from critically engaging with the neoliberal notion of "empowerment." They also avoided openly criticizing the Bush administration's military intervention and its failure to provide security and reconstruction—let alone democracy and freedom. The dependency of some women's rights activists on U.S. or U.K. funding for various projects might work to silence them. But more often, it has been the perception that between the American and British occupation and the increasing threat of conservative and extremist forces, the former is the lesser of two evils (*ibid.* p. 2-3).

Yet, in our interviews with Iraqi women's rights activists, profound criticism of and opposition to the occupation have been increasingly common. Sawsan A. was initially a fervent supporter of the U.S./U.K. invasion in 2003, but she changed her mind by 2006:

I had so much hope in 2003. I thought the Americans and the British will make sure that women's rights will be protected. We worked so hard despite difficulties from the very beginning. There were conferences, meetings; we even organized demonstrations and sit-ins. Many educated women started projects to help poor illiterate women, widows and orphans. Things were not great but I believed that it was just a matter of time until we would manage to find a new way and live in a true democracy. But see what they have done to our country? Our politicians sit in the Green Zone while ordinary people are being killed every day. Terrorists control the streets and the Americans only watch. Women are targeted, especially those who have a public profile (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009a: 128).

Except for a very few women who continue to applaud the democratization and liberation efforts by the occupying forces and the elected government, the majority of women activists from central and southern Iraq are deeply disillusioned and disappointed. While generally critical of U.S./U.K. policies and Iraqi male politicians, women activists differ in terms of strategies forward: while a few ask for an immediate withdrawal of troops, others prefer to call for a concrete time table of withdrawal. Despite their misgivings, a considerable number of women activists preferred U.S. and U.K. troops to remain until the threat of Islamist militancy, random violent attacks, and sectarian violence has been controlled and Iraqi troops and police can take over. Meanwhile, many women's organizations have opted to be part of the political process, despite their opposition to many aspects of this process. Miriam H., who is active in a women's project in Baghdad, said:

We do not have a choice but to engage with the process. It is a reality whether we like it or not. But I have to admit we have spent most of the time campaigning and demonstrating against the way this process has taken place so far. One of our main objections is the exclusion of

women and the incompetence of people involved (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009a:129).

Another woman activist lamented the fact that the Iraqi women's movement has been unable to develop its capacity and focus on the real needs and issues, given how the political process was imposed:

We always had to follow the political agenda which prevented us from expanding and building our capacity as a movement. We had to focus on the elections, which did not allow us much space to develop our own projects. It is an ongoing problem. Lots of money is spent on women's rights awareness training, but the money should be spent on improving the humanitarian situation. How can I talk to poor women [sic] in the country side about her legal rights, if she is worried about finding medicine for her sick son (ibid)?

What engagement with the political process might mean is open to interpretation and varies from activist to activist. There are women and organizations in regular contact with the Iraqi government and the occupying forces within the Green Zone, particularly those women activists who are also part of political parties. But most of the women with whom we talked try to stay away from the Green Zone and avoid, as much as possible, close contact with the occupation forces, whilst advocating for women's rights (ibid).

Concluding Reflections

We both found inspiration in the writings and talks of many western feminists, most notably Cynthia Cockburn and Cynthia Enloe. Their feminist antimilitarist positions reveal the intersections of capitalism, war and imperialism and the central role gender plays in these processes and interconnections. But we have also been hugely inspired and educated by the numerous Iraqi women's right activists who are fighting on many fronts simultaneously: a foreign military intervention, capitalist expansion, Islamist extremists and local patriarchal conservative forces. Their struggles and campaigns deserve not only more widespread acknowledgment and support but also a central place in the documentation of global transnational feminism.

In Pratt's and my most recent publication, entitled *Women & War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* (Zed Books, 2009), we built on our respective empirical and theoretical work on Iraq. We included Palestine as another case study to explore the transnational dimensions of war and gender in the Middle East. Some key questions we addressed were: Where gender is instrumentalized by actors implicated in war and occupation, and where the international promotion of gender mainstreaming intensifies gender inequalities, what can feminist/women's solidarity movements do? What sort of transnational feminist politics should be constructed in order to support women's empowerment and peace-building (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009b: 260)?

We suggest differentiation. There is a difference between transnational feminist networks and campaigns that are *transnational in*

method by virtue of their spanning borders and nation-states through their membership, networking, communication (especially the Internet), and lobbying. These may not necessarily be rooted in post-colonial, anti-imperialist and global justice approaches. In other words, certain feminist organizations that are transnational in their methods are not necessarily transnational in their politics, working with neocolonial, capitalist and militaristic government agendas. Some transnational feminist organizations, campaigns and networks might even reproduce certain structural inequalities pertaining to capitalist exploitation, colonial domination or racial inequalities while championing the cause of women's rights. This is evident, for example, in both the Iraqi and the Palestinian contexts, where feminist activists and gender-mainstreaming experts fail to recognise the intersectionality of structural oppressions and the diversity of women's experiences and subjectivities (ibid).

On the other hand, we can point to emerging, self-conscious, transnational feminism that pays attention to intersections among nationality, race, gender, sexuality and other marks of difference in perpetuating economic exploitation, imperialism and neocolonialism. Self-proclaimed transnational feminist activists and organizations tend to pursue anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, antimilitarist, and antiracist positions whilst paying attention to the ways in which gender is inscribed in power relations. Here, one can speak of feminist campaigns that are *transnational in content and practices*. The feminist peace-with-social-justice network Women and Black has pursued such politics globally and with regard to different wars, including the war on terror. As small and informal as we are, Act Together: Women's Action for Iraq has also been trying to straddle this often painful and lonely path that avoids easy answers and simple truths.

Works Cited

- Al-Ali, Nadjie (2007) *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Al-Ali, Nadjie and Nicola Pratt (2009a) *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Al-Ali, Nadjie and Nicola Pratt (eds.) (2009b) *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives*. London & New York: Zed Books
- Al-Ali, Nadjie (2005) "Gendering Reconstruction: Iraqi Women between Dictatorship, Wars, Sanctions and Occupation," in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4-5 (2005), pp. 7-47.
- Al-Ali, Nadjie & Yasmin Hussein (2003) "Between Dreams and Sanctions: Teenage Lives in Iraq," in Akbar Mahdi (ed.) *Teenagers in the Middle East*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, p. 46.
- Rohde, Achim (2006) "Facing Dictatorship: State Society Relations in Ba'thist Iraq", unpublished PhD dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, (April 2006), p. 236.

UNDP (2000) 1999-2000 Country Report, Iraq Country Office,
June 2000.