Iraqi Women in Diasporic Spaces: Political Mobilization, Gender and Citizenship

Résumé. Les femmes irakiennes en diaspora : mobilisation politique, genre et citoyenneté
Cet article étudie la mobilisation politique des femmes irakiennes dans les espaces de la diaspora, en particulier le Royaume-Uni, les États-Unis et la Jordanie, comme l’action des femmes à l’intérieur de l’Irak. Il traite de deux principales questions : 1) jusqu’à quel point les différences de contexte politique, économique et juridique dans les trois pays contribuent-elles à orienter l’action des femmes et 2) quelles relations et quelles dynamiques se mettent en place entre les militantes de la diaspora et de l’intérieur. Cet article est basé sur des données empiriques originales recueillies à l’occasion d’un travail de terrain réalisé aux États-Unis, au Royaume Uni et en Jordanie en 2004 et 2005. Entretiens informels et observation participante sont les principales méthodes mises en œuvre dans le cadre d’une enquête plus large sur la contribution des femmes à la transition politique. La dimension comparative est importante du fait que la culture et le climat politique général, les histoires migratoires, les idéologies et relations de genre sont différentes d’un pays à l’autre. L’auteur présente les organisations de femmes existantes, les groupes et réseaux et discute les obstacles à un engagement plus important dans le processus politique. Une dimension importante est la relation complexe entre les femmes restées à l’intérieur de l’Irak et celles qui sont revenues après 2003 ou agissent de l’extérieur.

Abstract. This article examines the political mobilization of Iraqi women activists in diasporic spaces, including the U.K. the U.S., Jordan as well as women’s activism inside Iraq. It addresses two main questions: 1) in how far the different political, economic and legal conditions in the UK, US and Jordan shape women’s activities or lack thereof, and 2) the relationships and

* Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, UK.
dynamics between Iraqi women activists from the diaspora and inside Iraq. It is based on original empirical data obtained through fieldwork in the UK, US and Jordan in 2004 & 2005. Informal interviews and participant observation are the main methods for an ongoing wider project about Iraqi women’s contribution to political transition. The comparative dimension is particularly important since general political climate and culture, as well as historical migration trajectories, gender ideologies and relations vary in the three host countries. The author maps out the existing women’s organizations, groups and networks and discusses impediments and obstacles to a greater involvement in political processes. One important dimension is the complex relationship between women who remained inside Iraq and those who returned post-2003 or are active while being based outside.

The aim of this article is to look at the intersections between citizenship and diaspora political mobilization with a special reference to gender and conflict in post-Ba’thist Iraq, that is, since the US invasion of 2003. The article is based on fieldwork conducted amongst Iraqi women refugee and migrant communities within the UK (London), the US (Detroit/Dearborn & San Diego) and in Jordan (Amman) as well as with Iraqi women who continue to live inside Iraq (interviewed in Jordan). The fieldwork is ongoing and this article presents work in progress. So far, I have interviewed over 80 women activists of different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds as well as of different age groups. My preliminary findings are also informed by my own political involvement with mainly two women’s organizations, particularly the London- based Act Together: Women’s Action on Iraq and Women in Black UK.

For the purpose of this article I loosely define political mobilization and activism as including a range of activities varying from charity and humanitarian work, advocacy and lobbying (mostly to governments but also consciousness-raising amongst general population), letter writing campaigns, talks, conferences and workshops, media representation, participation in demonstrations and vigils, as well as direct involvement in political processes inside Iraq through working with US & UK civil and military bodies as well as emerging Iraqi civil society.

I will start out by briefly discussing the notion of “diaspora space” as well as the specific ways in which the concept of citizenship has entered my research, before moving to an empirically-based analysis of the different political spaces available for Iraqi diaspora women activists in the UK, the US and Jordan as well as inside Iraq. My article will finish with an exploration of the intersections between the contestation of citizenship across diasporic spaces, highlighting the encounter and tensions between diaspora women/returnees on the one side and women who have remained in Iraq throughout.

**Defining “Diaspora Spaces”**

In the context of post-modern and post-colonial approaches and the increasing appeal of cultural studies, the terms *diaspora* and *diasporic communities* have
gained new meanings and dimensions. *Diaspora* denotes experiences of movement and displacement, and the social, cultural and political formations emerging out of this displacement. More and more, it has been used in a metaphorical sense, referring to hybrid identity formations (Hall, 1990), arguing against reifications of ethnicity and culture (Gilroy, 1993) and explaining cultural shifts in general. For the purpose of this article, the term *diaspora* is defined much more narrowly as I am specifically focussing on a conflict-generated diaspora: a diaspora that originates in conflict and that has emerged through forced migration. Unlike some authors, I argue, however, that “forced migration” cannot simply be contrasted with voluntary or economic migration. Rather, there exists a continuum between flight in a situation of acute danger and actual conflict and migration in a pre-conflict yet tension-ridden period. Economic necessities and crises force people to migrate, as do armed conflict and violence. Iraq is a case in point, presenting a continuum of economically driven migrants, especially under economic sanctions (1991-2003) which were part of a political crisis together with political refugees fleeing the persecution, torture and repression of the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003). This is in the context of a longer history of various forms of migration – for education, labour and from persecution well before the rise of the Ba’th.

Conflict-generated diasporas tend to involve identities that emphasize links to symbolically valuable territory and an aspiration to return once the homeland is freed or conflict has subsided. Aside from constructions of identities bound up with the “homeland”, social mobilization is also generally linked to a territorially defined country of origin. This mobilization could take many forms: political, economic, social, cultural and military. It could aim to end conflict and war, promote peace and reconstruction or it could actually support armed struggle and conflict, even hinder peace initiatives. Diasporas rarely constitute homogeneous political and social entities or communities. Different elements of a specific diaspora could pursue opposing aims and strategies. In the context of the various components of the Iraqi diaspora, there have been numerous divisions and positions *vis-à-vis* the recent war, the role of the US and the UK, the political process after the downfall of Saddam Husayn and the role of the previously exiled opposition parties.

Gender is only one among many differentiating factors within a diaspora, others being class, ethnic and religious background, political affiliation, place of origin and the specific experience of conflict. Those refugees who have had traumatic experiences of violence might have emotional and political attitudes towards conflict very different from those who have had no direct experience of violence. Based on my previous research on Bosnian refugees (Al-Ali, 2002) and my present research amongst Iraqi women refugees, I have noticed that this can go in both directions: experience of violence might radicalise a person and create militant supporters of armed struggle, or it might create people who abhor violence and promote peace. While this holds true for men and women alike, there are certain indications and possible predisposing conditions in societies...
prior to the outbreak of conflict that might shape the way men and women react and act during conflict and in the aftermath1.

By engaging in economic, social, cultural and political activities that span across national boundaries, members of diasporas might contribute to accelerate or prolong war and conflict as well as creating new possibilities and opportunities for peace-making and reconstruction. Although transnational migration as a process linking migrants to their countries of origin has always existed, the nature and quality of transnational ties have undergone significant changes in time, being shaped by the restructuring of the global economy and the transformation of processes of capital accumulation, as well as by the expansion and broader access to new technologies of travel and information2.

Diasporic identities are at once local and global, constituted in and through networks of transnational identifications with “imagined” as well as “encountered” collectivities. Avtar Brah’s notion of “diaspora space” allows us to connect locations of violent conflict with people living “in peace” elsewhere:

“Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes…[and] is « inhabited » not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (Brah, 1996: 181).

The concept of diaspora space is designed to take account of the entanglements of genealogies of “dispersal” with those of “staying put” so that the “native” is rendered as much a diasporian as the diasporic subject is nativised (Brah, forthcoming). It is important to emphasise that all parties to such encounters are deeply marked by them, albeit differently depending upon the specific configurations of power mobilised by the encounter (ibid.). The concept of diaspora space seems particularly relevant in the context of the specific political and economic role of the Iraqi diaspora and its complex relationships with Iraqis who have remained within the country.

Finally, I conceptualise conflict-generated diasporas in terms of an ongoing process rather than a state of being. Diaspora formations happen over a period of time and many diasporas, like Iraqi diasporic communities, do link in with migration waves of previous periods either of refugees or of labour migrants. As many conflict-generated diasporas are relatively young or are built upon foundations laid by older communities, they are partly in the making (and un-making). I suggest that it is necessary to examine the conditions and circumstances in the country of origin as well as in the receiving country in order to grasp the many dimensions shaping diaspora politics from a gender perspective.

1. I do not have the space to elaborate here, but I have discussed some of the specific conditions shaping gender ideologies and relations and also attitudes towards violence and war prior to the outbreak of hot conflict elsewhere (Al-Ali, forthcoming).
2. See for example Glick-Schiller, 1999; and Vertovec, 2001.
Gender & Citizenship

State citizenship as a criterion for membership in the national collectivity could potentially be “the most inclusive mode of joining a collectivity, because in principle anybody – of whatever origin or culture – might be able to join” (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 24). But in reality, state citizenship is also exclusive and tends to favour those with socio-economic resources. Gender is one of the many factors (others are ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, place of residence, etc.), which affect people’s citizenship and the distribution of resources. Within any given nation-state, women tend to be subject to specific laws and regulations, despite being included in the general body of the citizens.

Valentine Moghadam’s gendered analysis of the intersections between national identity formation and citizenship in the context of the Middle East and North Africa (Moghadam, 1999) provides empirical evidence and a useful analytical framework for exploring women’s struggles for citizenship rights in the region. Her politically grounded approach is relevant and applicable to many other contexts, such as post-Saddam Husayn Iraq. Women’s participation in political processes in the context of reconstruction and political transition, contestations about women’s legal rights (enshrined in the previous Transitional Administrative Law or TAL and the current Iraqi constitution), women’s access to education and employment, and the emergence of women’s organizations, are all aspects of Iraqi women’s citizenship. Moreover, Iraqi women’s resistance to the occupation as well as to encroaching Islamist political agendas and social norms are also crucial in the context of struggles for citizenship rights and inclusion in processes related to nation-building post-2003.

For the purpose of this article, I would like to explore the notion of citizenship not only in the context of current contestations about Iraqi women political and civil rights as manifested in the constitution, but also by considering citizenship in relation to political spaces and opportunities within diasporic spaces. It is obvious that unequal citizenship rights for men and women often holds true in the context of both the country of origin and the country of residence. The conditions for being involved in contestations and struggles related to the “home land” are not always available to women, or are limited or framed within a set of normative and cultural gendered rules (Salih, 2004).

This might be particularly the case in the context of post-war situations when traditional gender roles inside or outside the home are evoked. After the end of the fighting in the country of origin, violence against women is often endemic, partly due to the general state of anarchy and chaos but also as an element of heightened aggression and militarization, and the prevailing constructions of masculinity promoted during conflict. An extreme example of this situation is contemporary Iraq, where various insurgencies partly engendered by opposition to military occupation have made everyday life extremely violent and insecure, in more so than during the period of formal military intervention. Women in particular have suffered from the chaos, lawlessness and lack of security and
have been subject to increased harassment, abductions as well as sexual abuse and rape.

For women at home and within the diaspora, it often seems as if the potential challenges posed to traditional gender ideologies and roles during wartime subsequently becomes too great for patriarchal societies to accept in peace. Women often have less political space to challenge gender relations and to contribute to political processes in the aftermath of conflict. Historically, societies neither defend the spaces women create during struggle nor acknowledge the ingenious ways in which women have come to take on new and additional responsibilities. In the diaspora, however, the potential to challenge traditional gender ideologies and relations, and thereby to increase women’s political mobilization might be greater. This, however, is only possible if gender ideologies and relations in the receiving country are far more liberal and progressive. But even then, there is a risk of a hardening of notions pertaining to “cultural authenticity”, and “traditions”, depending on the specific circumstances of the diaspora within the new country of settlement.

On the other hand, gender ideologies and cultural norms might enable women to engage with women from different ethnic, religious backgrounds or political convictions more easily than might be the case for their men-folk. This has certainly been true among many of the Bosnian and Iraqi women and men I interviewed. As women were perceived to be less significant for political processes, their transgression of “talking to the other side” was less threatening than if men had done it. Moreover, some women appeared to have been more willing and eager to try to build bridges and mobilize as women, rather than in terms of their ethnic and religious affiliation or political parties. This is despite the fact that women who reach out to “the enemy” are frequently branded traitors and “loose women”. Korac, for example, alerts us to the distinction between “patriotic women” and “disloyal women” commonly made in former Yugoslavia (Korac, 1996: 28). The former were those through whom the nation could “rebuild links with the ‘honourable histories, religions and traditions,’ while the latter betrayed the ‘ethnic-national collective’ by seeking to initiate or maintain solidarity across ethno-national boundaries” (ibid.).

Political Spaces in the Iraqi Diaspora

The preliminary findings of my research amongst Iraqi women activists in the UK, the US and Jordan reveal the different levels of political spaces and resources available within these three sites. Not surprisingly, Iraqi women in Jordan are most limited in terms of their transnational activism because of the restrictive political spaces for civil society in general as well as the difficult economic, legal and political conditions facing refugees within Jordan. Yet, more astonishing to me have been the limitations and restrictions circumscribing the activism of Iraqi women residing in the US in comparison with those being based in the
UK. Aside from the scarcity of independent women’s organizations in the US – independent both from the US government and from Iraqi political parties – what has struck me most so far is the relatively narrow political spectrum of Iraqi activism within the US in contrast to the far ranging spectrum both in terms of political views and forms of mobilization and activism found in the UK. While ethnic and religious divisions exist in both the US and Britain, the large presence of secular political parties in Britain, such as the Iraqi Communist Party and Iraqi National Accord, have contributed to the building of more non-sectarian alliances and organizations. Moreover, the specific political climate in the US, particularly post-September 11, has limited the political spaces and resources available for those not in agreement with US Middle East policy. Several Iraqi women interviewed in the US mentioned their fear of expressing dissent from US policy, even more so following the stringent Patriot Act of 2001.

Historically, the UK has been the political and cultural centre of the Iraqi diaspora with Iraqi migrants and refugees having constituted the majority of asylum seekers in many years (UNHCR 2002). Although there are no reliable statistics available, estimates for numbers of Iraqis residing in the UK range between 200,000 and 300,000. While London has certainly represented the centre of Iraqi political, cultural and social activism, there are substantial Iraqi communities in a number of other UK cities such as Birmingham and Manchester. In addition, the UK government’s involvement in Iraq as well as many of its policies have implications for the ability of Iraqi migrant/refugee networks to influence political processes inside Iraq. A thriving civil society of Arab dissidents and intellectuals as well as a strong anti-war/peace movement and a diverse women’s movement have constituted the backdrop against which Iraqi women’s organizations and individual activists have flourished in Britain.

Women’s groups affiliated to political parties (i.e. the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), the Iraqi Worker’s Communist Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), *Hizb al-Da’wa*, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), the Iraqi Democratic Party) exist side by side with independent groups, such as the Iraqi Women’s Rights Organization, the Iraqi Women’s League, Iraqi Women for Peace and Democracy, and Act Together: Women’s Action on Iraq. Women activists also work through mixed groups like the Iraqi Prospect Organization, which mainly consist of young professional Iraqi Shi’is based in and around London. In addition, women are active within their respective ethnic and religious communities, such as the Assyrian Club of London, Kurdish Community Associations and the Shi’i al-Khu’i Foundation. These various groups and organizations represent a wide range of activism - from charity to advocacy and direct involvement with British government as well as with significant political actors inside Iraq. Significantly, Iraqi diaspora activism in the UK is extremely varied in terms of the specific attitudes towards the recent war, the occupation and recent political developments in Iraq. Individual activists whom I interviewed differed a lot with respect to their specific attitudes towards war, ongoing violence and the political process in Iraq.
These differences are not easily attributable to specific variables, such as ethnic and religious backgrounds, since previous political experiences, education, actual experiences of war and conflict, socialization and experience of a current political milieu as well as personality are all part of women’s political trajectories. Alliances and links with women’s or anti-war organizations in the country of residence might shape the specific attitudes towards homeland politics. Members of the London-based group “Act Together: Women’s Action on Iraq”, for example, have been very much influenced by their alliance with Women in Black (WIB), a worldwide network of women opposing war and campaigning for peace with justice. While WIB is not homogeneous in terms of the political orientation and background of its members, it does project and mobilize around non-violent resistance.

Without doubt, Iraqi women’s associations in the US have been influential with respect to US policies on Iraq and vis-à-vis the various interim Iraqi governments. US-based Iraqi women activists and organizations have been heavily involved in shaping emerging women’s organizations and groups inside Iraq. Organizations like the Women’s Alliance for a Democratic Iraq (WAFDI) are receiving grants for this purpose from the US government. The centrality of the US administration in directing Iraq’s political development, including the building of political institutions, drafting the constitution and the allocation of resources, place Iraqi women activists in the US in a crucial position, particularly since the current Pentagon-driven US administration has a long history of negotiations with the former exiled Iraqi opposition, which has had a disproportionately high number of representatives in the various interim governments and institutions inside Iraq post-2003.

Yet, unlike in the UK, there are not many Iraqi women’s groups in the US. The most prominent are Women for a Free Iraq, which then formed the Women’s Alliance for a Democratic Iraq (WAFDI). The majority of Iraqi women activists in the US, except for those affiliated to peace groups like Women in Black, have been working closely with the US government. There are some women activists who work through established political parties, especially the Kurdish parties, including the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Shi’i political parties like Hizb al-Da’wa, or Munazzama al-'Amal. The latter have largely kept their independence from US-government led activities, especially where women are concerned.

In comparing the two sites of diaspora political mobilization, one crucial factor mentioned several times by the women I spoke to is the difficulty of mobilizing when they are as scattered geographically as they are in the US. While it is certainly the case that it is much easier for UK-based Iraqi women activists to meet each other – mostly in London – geographical dispersion did not explain the lack of a broad range of women’s activism in places like “Arab Detroit”.

3. For an in-depth analysis of US government and institutional gender policies and strategies on Iraq, see Pratt (forthcoming)
with its large concentrations of Iraqi Chaldean and Iraqi Shi‘i communities. Moreover, the most prominent Iraqi group WAFDI is also dispersed within the US and inside Iraq, but uses the Internet as a main tool of communication and activism.

What became obvious is that the specific political climate in the US, particularly since September 11th, has limited the political spaces and resources available for those not in agreement with US policies towards Iraq. Several Iraqi women I interviewed mentioned their fear of expressing dissent to US policies, some of them referring to the “Patriot Act” of 2001. Especially those women who have not yet obtained their US citizenship admitted that they would not want to risk either prolonging the naturalisation process or perhaps even being refused citizenship.

Dr Zeinab N.,5 whose outspokenness, overt expressions of religiosity and refusal to join the Ba‘th party while a university lecturer in Baghdad, forced her to flee Iraq in late 1970s, was one of those who felt that her political activism within the US might be having a detrimental impact on her legal status. Dr Zeinab continued to be persecuted and harassed by Ba‘thist students and officials while finishing her Ph.D. at a US university in the early 1980s. A sympathizer, although not a member, of the Shi‘i Hizb al-Da‘wa, and an active community leader within the Shi‘i community in Dearborn, she has had a high profile amongst the religiously inclined Iraqi Shi‘i community in the US. Shortly after the downfall of the Ba‘th regime in 2003, Dr Zeinab returned to Baghdad in order to help with reconstruction and share her acquired expertise and skills with a PhD in nutrition. For a while, she went back and forth between Iraq and the US, until, late in 2004, immigration officers unexpectedly took away her Green Card when she returned from one of her visits to Iraq:

“Until now I do not have US citizenship. They gave citizenship to my three children, but not to me, because I have been politically active. They asked me a few weeks ago: ‘Have you ever opposed your government?’ This is a trick question. If I say no, they will accuse me of having been a Ba‘thist, if I say yes, they might not give me US citizenship because I am a trouble maker. Am I allowed to be active here? This is a double standard. If you are not a US citizen, you do not have the right to speak. They took my green card away after I came back from Iraq in 2004. I went back and forth for a while, but I never stayed for more than 3 months. Then they told me to stay here for 6 months, and they said they would give it back to me. Today I had to go to court, but they still refuse to give me back my Green card.”

By the second time I interviewed Dr Zeinab, in September 2005, 6 months after our initial interview, she had clearly given up on her idea to move back to Iraq. She felt disillusioned due not only to the deteriorating security and

4. The Patriot Act of 2002 is meant to prevent terrorism, but critics allege that it undermines civil rights and liberties.
5. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the women I interviewed.
economic situation inside Iraq, but also in response to the resentment and hostility she had encountered from people inside Iraq. Struggling with tears, she told me:

“I lost here and I lost there. There is no room for me there [in Iraq]. I have been here for 30 years, working hard, paying taxes, and I get nothing. How does that make me feel [she starts crying]. I feel sorry for having lived here. I feel I have no place, neither here nor there. I worked all my life here. I did everything: babysitting, cleaning houses. Anything. And I paid taxes every year. Three quarters of my money goes to them. I wish I would have lived on social welfare, on their assistance and not worked all my life.”

Aside from perceived and actual risks and restrictions related to legal status and citizenship, economic factors are also crucial in shaping the possibilities and spaces for political mobilization. In the UK, a relatively generous social welfare system consisting of both publicly subsidized housing but also income support and free health care, allows often highly educated and previously professional Iraqi women activists to get involved in political activism rather than seeking employment. In the US, Iraqi women I talked to, especially those who more recently migrated or fled to the US, frequently complained about their difficult economic circumstances and the need to work extremely hard, sometimes at more than one job, just to be able to pay the bills. This not only had a negative impact on their family and social lives, but prevented many women from getting involved in community activities and political mobilization.

As for the third site of research – Jordan – independent women’s organizations are virtually absent, in spite of the fact that transnational activities between Iraq and Jordan are intense and significant, due to its geographical proximity to Iraq and because Jordan is host to a large number of Iraqi refugees – over 300,000 prior to the recent war (Chatelard, 2002), with numbers having been on the increase. Before the fall of the Ba’th regime, Amman was the headquarters of a number of Iraqi opposition groups. In light of current security difficulties within Iraq, Iraqi women activists from inside Iraq travel frequently to Jordan for meetings with Iraqis from abroad and as well as with representatives of international organizations. Thus in December 2003 alone, two large conferences were held on the role of women in Iraqi reconstruction which were both well attended by Iraqi women activists. Last July, while I was doing fieldwork in Amman, there were numerous meetings and workshops taking place in Amman, revolving around the process of drafting the constitution.

Yet, the conditions for political activism for Iraqis residing in Jordan are extremely difficult. Iraqi refugees in Jordan are not granted official protection and many are prevented from working, which means that the majority live in poverty and are very vulnerable. Even the rising population of well-to do Iraqis, which are shaping the intellectual, cultural and artistic development of rapidly growing Amman are restricted in their activities. The Jordanian government, perhaps under pressure from the US, does not encourage the development of political and civil society organizations on its soil, being extremely cautious
and sensitive about its own stability as well as its complicated relationship with neighbouring Iraq.

**Iraqi women’s activism in the diasporic space**

Since April 2003, women’s organizations and initiatives have been mushrooming all over Iraq. Many of these organizations, like the National Council of Women (NWC), the Iraqi Women’s Higher Council (IWHC), the Iraqi Independent Women’s Group or the Society for Iraqi Women for the Future, for example, have been founded either by members of the Iraqi National Council (INC, surely) or prominent professional women with close ties to political parties. Many of the organizations were initiated by returnees, i.e. Iraqi women activists who were part of the diaspora before 2003. While mainly founded and represented by elite women, some of the organizations have broad memberships and branches throughout the country. Their activities revolve around humanitarian and practical projects, such as income generation, legal advice, free health care and counselling as well as political advocacy. There has also been a flourishing of locally based women’s initiatives and groups, revolving mainly around practical needs related to the escalating humanitarian crisis, as well as the need for education and training (e.g. computer and English classes). Many of the initiatives filling the gap in terms of the absence of state provision where welfare and health are concerned are related to religiously-motivated organizations and groups.

The three main issues that have mobilised women politically mainly from educated middle-class backgrounds throughout Iraq are:

1) The attempt to replace the relatively progressive personal status law governing marriage, divorce and child custody with a more conservative law (Article 137).

2) The issue of a women’s quota for political representation. Although women were unsuccessful to obtain a 40% quota in the transitional administrative law (TAL), they managed to negotiate a 25% quota.

3) The debate over the Iraqi constitution, mainly with respect to the role of Islam, the personal status laws and the women’s quota.

Several Iraqi diaspora organizations and individual activists based in the US and the UK were initially instrumental in facilitating and encouraging Iraqi women’s political mobilization. A flurry of conferences and the establishment of several women’s centres marked the early phase of post-Saddam Iraq. Diaspora women became involved in charity organizations, humanitarian assistance, training programmes, advocacy around women’s issues, democracy and human rights and wider political issues both inside Iraq and in their countries of residence. Not unsurprisingly, and largely due to the deteriorating security situation women’s activism in Iraq has been seriously impeded. As middle-class professionals as well as foreign passport holders have been key targets of both...
frequent kidnappings for ransom as well as targeted assassinations, Iraqi women returnees have been particularly vulnerable. Moreover, the lack of credibility of the large number of former exiles now holding key political positions, and who have been disproportionately represented in the various interim governments has also contributed to a growing resentment towards women returnees who have been involved in women’s organizations and political processes and reconstruction in general.

Najwa R., a middle aged professional woman who had been living in exile for over 30 years, first in London and then Amman in order to be closer to Baghdad, her home town, told me:

“Many Iraqis who lived outside wanted to come inside to help rebuild the country, but we faced this hatred, this anger: « You did not see it! You did not live it! Why should you come now? » They are very bitter about it. I even felt it with my own family. There is a bitterness towards those of us who did not live through the misery. I understand their position. I always thought that those who should go back should not look for positions, but should go as advisors.”

Others were much less understanding in their assessment and their account of their experience inside Iraq. Widad M., a doctor and activist in her 50s who lived in London for the past 25 years and worked for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in 2003 and 2004, said:

“It was very shocking, even my family had problems accepting me as I am. The characters changed, they seem to have closed up. At one time, I organized a meeting between students and the Ministry of Education. They wanted to discuss things. The first thing they wanted to discuss was young girls turning up at the university with short sleeves or short skirts or dresses. The mentality went so wrong. Why is this so important to them? They do not know how to run an organization. They are not used to taking any initiative. And everyone has this strong sense of entitlement, which is not very constructive if you want to rebuild a country.”

Like many other women I spoke to, Widad feels very disillusioned. She was not the only one who told me that she was giving up because her efforts were not appreciated by people inside Iraq and also because things had just gone from bad to worse. Leila A., a researcher in her mid 40s, who used to be very active in promoting health issues amongst the Iraqi refugee population in London, was one of the most outspoken diaspora women trying to influence UK policies on Iraq in 2003:

“I am totally fed up. Why am I giving up, because I am boiling with anger. There is so much corruption, so much undermining of local initiatives. International NGOs are trying to project themselves instead of trying to support local initiatives. DFID6 is spending lots of money on useless things. I put my life at risk, every time I go, and all I see is things getting worse, and I get criticism on top of it.”

In turn, several women who never left Iraq complained about “all these women who lived outside for 40 years and now want to tell us what we should

6. (UK) Department for International Development
do”. Many, although one has to stress not all, diaspora women are perceived to be patronizing and detached from realities on the ground. Amal R., a pharmacist who did not leave Iraq and who was one of the co-founders of “the Women and Knowledge Society”, a women’s organization based in Baghdad that is providing literacy and English classes, computer training as well as Qur’anic recitation classes, mainly to widows and young women, complained:

“I participated in a workshop on the constitution. They asked us to come to Amman. There was a big problem: most of the women who participated are women who have lived outside for 40 years. This was the first time I spoke about this subject with Iraqi women who had been abroad. I was surprised to hear what they were saying. They said women had no rights before. They have not been to school, not to university. I asked them whether they lived in Iraq. Most had just returned after 40 years. I told them: “Look, all the women here are over 35 years old. We all have college degrees, our education was free. I was in the college of pharmacy. In that college, women were the majority”. They were saying all the bad things about Saddam. I said: “We have to tell the truth. Not everything was bad.”

Some pro-war diaspora women, such as members of WAFDI in the US, have been involved in a widely publicised campaign supported by the US government stressing the previous regime’s poor record on women’s rights. Without wanting to belittle the atrocities of Saddam Hussein and his regime, some of the alleged claims contradict the accounts of the majority of women I interviewed. One especially absurd example is the assertion of some pro-war activists that women were not allowed to enter university under Saddam.

However, in the context of the specific debate about the Iraqi constitution, it became obvious that some of the discrepancies between diaspora women’s attitudes and women “from the inside” had more to do with lack of actual information about the content of the constitution and its implications rather than deeply entrenched political differences. On several occasions women from inside Iraq who were just visiting Amman told me that they were happy with the call for the implementation of the *shar’ia*. Azza A., for example, said: “We are Muslims. Of course we want Islamic law”. However, when I began to discuss the possible implications of this, such as the right to unilateral divorce, restrictions on freedom of movement, increased polygamy, changes in existing child custody laws etc., most women I talked to expressed shock and acknowledged that they had been unaware of these implications.

Manal Omar, a Palestinian-American activist, has been working for Women to Women International for many years and spent more than two years in Iraq before the deteriorating security situation forced her to move to Amman. When discussing the constitutional process, she expressed a great sense of frustration not only about the constitution itself but also the drafting process. Even more

---

7. Women to Women International is US-based NGO, founded by Zeinab Salbi, a feminist activist of Iraqi origin. Women to Women International has been active all over the world trying to address women’s needs in the context of conflict and post-conflict societies.
significantly, she was deeply concerned about the lack of dissemination and lack of education concerning the contents of the constitution:

“If there had been more time, we could have had these discussions. We cannot control security, but we can control the time frame. The United Alliance has not been clear about this. If Sistani interprets the law, fine, but if a Wahhabi interprets Islamic law, it will be used against the Shi’is and against women. How can we protect Iraqis from Islamic law being misused?”

Manal told me that she strongly favoured Plan B – that is, voting against the constitution in order to allow for more time to educate women about its implications, especially about the role of Islamic law in general and the dangers associated with communally based personal status laws.

It is unfortunate that, except for a relatively small number of secular activists inside Iraq, many Iraqi women construct their differences with many of the mainly secular diaspora activists as a contestation between “authentic” culture and values on the one side and the imposition of foreign values and political agendas on the other. The trend to associate feminism and women’s rights with western agendas is, of course, not unique to the Iraqi context, but has been a continuous challenge and difficulty for feminists in the region since the beginning of women’s movements at the turn of the 20th century. Yet, the polarization and construction of difference is particularly detrimental in the context of war and occupation.

Conclusion

In many post-conflict settings, women have been sidelined or marginalized from formal peace initiatives, political transitions and reconstruction efforts. Formal peace negotiations among warring parties and their mediators serve largely to define basic power relations and to identify priorities for immediate post-war political activity (Sorenson, 1998). Traditional militarised gender regimes tend to endow men with the power in politics and reduce the role of the women to their functions within the family (Cockburn, 2002). However, women within conflict-ridden societies as well as within diasporic communities do find ways to work for peace and reconciliation through grass-roots activism. Women from all walks of life participate in this informal peace-building work, but their activities are often disparaged as “volunteer”, “charitable” or “social”, even when they have a political impact (Sorenson, 1998).

Despite UN Resolution 1325 passed in October 2000 stating the importance of the inclusion of women and mainstreaming gender into all aspects of post-conflict resolution and peace operations, the reality of post-conflict situations is often quite different. If at all, UN Resolution 1325 is frequently translated into appointing a few women to governments and ministries. In fact, the mainstreaming of gender should properly involve the appointment of women to interim governments, ministries and committees dealing with systems of local and
national governance, the judiciary, policing, human rights, allocating funds, free media development, and all economic processes. It should also aim to encourage independent women’s groups, NGOs and community-based organizations.

In some post-conflict settings, especially with respect to Muslim societies, the stress on UN resolution 1325 is often presented by those who wish to manipulate the situation as part of a “western plot” to destroy these societies’ traditional culture and values. This is particularly the case in the context of US-led military intervention, such as in Iraq. Paradoxically, people who might otherwise be sympathetic to issues pertaining to women’s rights and women’s equality may well express strong opposition to women’s inclusion in post-conflict reconstruction if this has been made one of the main aims of the occupying powers. The political involvement or even return of diaspora women might evoke resentment and a backlash for local women’s rights activists. This trend has been evident in the Iraqi context where, for a variety of reasons, influential figures from the diaspora have played a disproportionate role in the new Iraqi leadership supported by the US. Diaspora women have tried to put their mark on emerging women’s organizations and on the contestation of citizenship within Iraq, but have frequently been perceived as being patronizing or being part of a “western plot”.

Yet it is not only the specific conditions and attitudes towards the diaspora in the country of origin, i.e. Iraq, that has shaped Iraqi women’s political mobilization in diasporic spaces, but also specific conditions and citizenship rights in the country of residence. In addition to obvious differences related to legal status and wider legal rights, inclusion and exclusion of migrants and refugees in civil society, and, importantly, economic conditions, are all crucial factors in enabling or hindering political engagement. Expanding the notion of citizenship to include notions of “belonging”, we should also pay attention to the general political climate and the attitudes towards migrants and refugees within their countries of residence.

Sadly, Iraqi women along the whole continuum of diasporic spaces, regardless of whether they are inside or outside Iraq, or living and acting across transnational social and political spaces, are torn – as so many of their sisters have been in the past – between the struggle and rhetoric of national liberation, the instrumentalization of women’s issues by the US and UK governments, and the symbolic appropriation of “authentic Muslim culture” by Islamist insurgents and political actors.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


