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Nationalism, Conflict and the Feminist
Subject Among Modern Iraqi Women

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Nationalism, Conflict and the Feminist Subject Among Modern Iraqi Women

Abstract

The American occupation of Iraq, now widely acknowledged in many progressive and not-necessarily progressive circles as an ill-conceived initiative, went through numerous phases in its justification. After the United States government realized that there were no weapons of mass destruction to be found in the country, its rhetoric in framing the war shifted quickly to emphasize democracy, a significant element of which was the liberation of women. This argument used Iraq as a symbol for the backward and traditional stereotypes of the Middle East, and emphasized its despotic government and 'tribal' mentality to frame the invasion as an effort in the name of humanity's collective progress toward Western modernity. Considerable ink has been spilled elsewhere contesting and condemning that narrative; I will not take up the question of its validity today. Instead, I would like to discuss some of the ways that Iraqi women are now articulating and remembering Saddam Hussein's Iraq, particularly the situation for women therein, and the manner in which those narratives can be understood as a response and a resistance to the American decision to frame the occupation in terms of women's rights.

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The American occupation of Iraq, now widely acknowledged in many progressive and not-necessarily progressive circles as an ill-conceived initiative, went through numerous phases in its justification. After the United States government realized that there were no weapons of mass destruction to be found in the country, its rhetoric in framing the war shifted quickly to emphasize democracy, a significant element of which was the liberation of women. This argument used Iraq as a symbol for the backward and traditional stereotypes of the Middle East, and emphasized its despotic government and ‘tribal’ mentality to frame the invasion as an effort in the name of humanity’s collective progress toward Western modernity. Considerable ink has been spilled elsewhere contesting and condemning that narrative; I will not take up the question of its validity today. Instead, I would like to discuss some of the ways that Iraqi women are now articulating and remembering Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, particularly the situation for women therein, and the manner in which those narratives can be understood as a response and a resistance to the American decision to frame the occupation in terms of women’s rights.

As Nadjé Al-Ali, a professor of anthropology at SOAS in London and herself of Iraqi descent, has stated numerous times in her many published works on Iraqi women, the war has focused public attention on the stories and narratives of women from Iraq or living there now. This newfound interest has given rise to a series of memoirs and other writings intended for a wide readership in the American public. Books such as

Riverbend: Girl Blog from Iraq, Haifa Zangana's *City of Widows*, and Al-Ali's own book, *What Kind of Liberation: Women, Islam, and the Occupation of Iraq*, which she co-authored with Nicola Pratt, form a collective of books that strive to make the experiences of Iraqi women available to an American audience. They can be found on the shelves of a neighborhood Barnes and Noble, and many of them take the idea of a liberated Iraq as a point of departure. By 'take it as a point of departure', I mean that they deliberately seek to contest it, and one of the manners in which they do so is by pointing out those elements of Saddam Hussein's policies that were favorable to women. This line of argument demands that the narrators make a distinction between basic human and civil rights, such as freedom of expression or access to quality medical care, and women's rights, like the opportunity to work and the choice to wear a veil or not.

I will not attempt to argue that the situation for women, or for any human being, in Iraq was made better by the American presence there, nor do I have any desire to mount a defense of Saddam Hussein as a defender of human rights or a progressive feminist leader. However, memory has a significant role to play in shaping the future, and to dismiss this emerging narrative as historically inaccurate would be to cast aside an important and possibly influential perspective. To quote anthropologists Joseph Climo and Maria Cattell, "In many important ways the human future depends on our understandings of the meanings of culture, social memory, and history." The presence of a mode of thinking that separates women's rights from other rights, whether or not it represents a majority opinion, will impact the attitudes women adopt toward the Iraqi state on the individual level and influence the political postures they adopt on a community or national level.

In order to better illustrate this tendency to emphasize the women-friendly elements of Saddam Hussein's policies, I will quote briefly from the books *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, a blog written by a 24 year old woman under the pen name Riverbend about her life in Baghdad with her family during the first year or so of the American presence there and published in book form; *City of Widows: An Iraqi Woman's Account of War and Resistance*, a memoir slash history by journalist and Iraqi exile Haifa Zangana; and from Nadjie Al-Ali's anthropological work *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*.

Haifa Zangana, an Iraqi expatriate living in London and a widely published journalist for the UK paper The Guardian and pan-Arab newspaper al Quds al Arabi published a book, *City of Widows*, in 2007 seeking to offer readers in the West "insight into a country they have impacted so fully and terribly" (Zangana 2007, 9). Zangana was herself a political prisoner under Saddam, and she admits in her text that writing a history of her country demanded that she come to terms with her own animosity toward the Baath party. Perhaps because of this desire to deal accurately with subject matter so personally sensitive, the history that she delivers about women's rights in Iraq hews closely to a division between civil and human rights and women's rights to do things like move freely throughout society without restrictions on their dress or behavior. That is to say, she makes a point of naming the atrocities of Saddam's regime while continuing to argue that, despite these things, the situation for women was better than it is now. She refers to American women's efforts to support Iraqi women in their reconstruction efforts through the formation of various NGOs sponsored in whole or in part by the United States government as "colonial feminists" working alongside the Bush administration to

indoctrinate Iraqi women to their way of life. She condemns their disregard for Iraqi women's long history of assuming agency in promoting their own interests, for example through their writing and their collective action during British mandate, the monarchy, and Baath rule. She refers to Iraqi women as "among the most liberated of their gender in the Middle East", and laments the fact that "Iraqi women have lost all they had achieved as activists before the invasion." (Zangana 2007 p 10)

Most interesting to me in Zangana's account is not her clear opposition to the American invasion and occupation of Iraq. As I said earlier in this talk, negative views of the American presence there are very much in the mainstream both among Iraqis and elsewhere. Her clear commitment to putting aside her own critical and even angry views on the Ba'th regime, despite her very ugly history with it, indicates a belief that there is something to be gained for all Iraqi women by acknowledging and remembering those good things that they did take from the years of despotism they endured. The American presence prompted Zangana's narrative, and appears to have pressed her to adapt her views of Saddam's regime in a fashion that reinforces this women's rights/human rights distinction.

Similarly, Riverbend, the blogger who kept many non-Iraqi readers apprised of events in the country on her website, advances many of the same ideas that Zangana uses in her discussions of Iraqi women. She calls pre-invasion Iraq "the most advanced country on women's rights in the Arab world!" (exclamation point) and continues, "When I analyzed my feelings [during the sanctions period], it always led back to the fact that I cherished the rights I had as an Iraqi Muslim woman - during the hard times, it was always a comfort that I could drive, learn, work for equal pay, dress the way I wanted and

practice Islam according to my values and beliefs without worrying whether I was too devout or not devout enough.” (Riverbend 2006, 225) It is worth noting that the sanctions period in Iraq, which lasted from 1990 until the fall of Saddam in 2003, was marked by remarkably high unemployment, erosion of educational opportunities for all Iraqis, including women, malnutrition and deteriorating public health. Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi and the Founding Director of Women for Women International, wrote of her visit to Iraq during the sanctions period that she saw, for the first time in her life, literate mothers with illiterate daughters (Salbi 2005, p 270).

Riverbend’s choice to reflect gratefully on her personal freedoms during the trying sanctions period is clearly an indictment of the environment in which she must have been living when she wrote this entry. It also underlines the extent to which the deprivation of rights in the current environment has given rise to this counter-narrative detailing the liberated lifestyles of women prior to the American presence. Favorably comparing Saddam’s Iraq to Bremer’s Iraq is a central point in evaluating the present environment in there. This is not to say that Riverbend is not telling the truth about her feelings, or to say that some or even most Iraqi women would not agree with her. But her juxtaposition of the travails of the sanctions period with the relative benefit accrued to women during that time suggests a divorce in her mind between women’s rights and human rights divined in response to US rhetoric on liberating women.

Nadje Al-Ali’s book *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*, an academic book published in 2007, chronicles accounts of Iraqi women both inside the country, and seeks to make a point somewhat at odds with the one I make here. Namely, Al-Ali communicates how much Iraqi women’s perspectives on their country’s traumatic

history and trying present vary depending on their demographic characteristics - such as, are they Sunni or Shia, did they live in Baghdad or in the provinces, and were they of the middle class, the poor, or the affluent. Her aim is to complicate the idea that there is one narrative that describes Iraqi women. I certainly have no desire to contest that assertion, and strive to keep it in mind as I investigate this topic. However, she arrives at a conclusion that might be applied to Iraqi women irrelevant to demographic. Describing her work in her own words, she writes, "I became acutely aware of the tendency to elevate and even glorify the past as it was seen through the filter of the present." (Al-Ali 2007, 261)

To an extent, this tendency is unavoidable. The present is, after all, the present. It appears worse simply because it is the reality of many women's lives when they wake each day, rather than the mere memories of their lives ten or twenty or thirty years ago. Regardless of its inevitability, though, it has implications for Iraqi women's personal narratives as avenues of subjectivity. Judith Butler, in her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, argues that the very act of narrating one's own story assumes an interlocutor prompting the self in question to share. Naturally, when faced with an interlocutor of this nature, an individual offers a partial explanation of him or herself as a response to the question, omitting and emphasizing certain details as befits the circumstance. America has become that interlocutor to Iraqi women: in attempting to project an identity onto them of premodernity before the invasion and closer to modernity in its aftermath, this project of liberation has demanded a response from them. Their response has been to emphasize the triumphs of the past and to criticize the present situation for its failure to realize those goals it set at its inception with respect to women's liberation.

The counter-narrative Iraqi women have sought to assert with regard to their supposed liberation under American occupation represents both a reaction to the imposed outside narrative coming from the West, and a reaction to the darkness of the past. Iraq as a nation has been ravaged by military dictatorships and sanctions over the last century, and Al-Ali's observation that each time period provokes nostalgia for the preceding one is certainly at work in helping to outline a new history of the country. Butler's notion of the self assumes that penumbra exist in the narration of identity; we can assume that, below the surface of any narrative presented exist a series of layers that are unknowable both to the conscious self and to the interlocutor or audience processing that narrative. As the 'new Iraq' takes shape, new narratives of the old Iraq will be constructed to give it a foundation. This means, very simplistically, that the way Iraqi women talk about their rights under Saddam Hussein has the potential to impact the way that they relate to the nascent Iraqi state of the present. One of the new narratives about the old Iraq that has come to light operates from a viewpoint wherein women's rights are considered as something related to, but separate from, civil and human rights. This idea has implications in numerous fields of thought and merits further investigation.