RESISTING OCCUPATION AND AUTHORITARIANISM
IRAQI FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AFTER THE U.S. INVASION

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ABSTRACT

After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Iraqi women were among the first to organize into political and humanitarian organizations. Officials from the United States government and Coalition Provisional Authority announced that Iraqi women were "free" and "liberated," but media reports, scholarship, and statements from Iraqi women suggest that women's rights have not been fully realized. Rather than portray Iraqi women as victims of occupation or patriarchal traditions, this paper uses social movement theory to examine how Iraqi women have organized to work greater rights. Relying primarily on statements from Iraqi women, this thesis distinguishes between two separate feminist movements in Iraq: liberal feminism and Islamic feminism. Though these are not meant rigid categories, they constitute two separate movements that define women's rights differently and engage in different kinds of activities in to push for these rights.

The paper begins by examining how the liberal feminist movement has responded to the agendas of the United States government and international NGOs in Iraq. While various organizations within the movement differ in their stance on the presence of U.S. troops or on whether to accept foreign funding, they come together as part of a unified feminist movement that engages in the claim-making and displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment that define a social movement. This is also clear in the way
the liberal feminist movement deals with the Iraqi government. Various organizations came together to mount a unified campaign for changes to the constitution and greater political power for women.

In addition to a liberal feminist movement, Iraq also has an emerging Islamic feminist movement that distinguishes itself by its effort to reinterpret Islamic law and frame women's rights as part of proper adherence to Islam. This movement frames women's rights and political events differently than the liberal feminist movement, and engages in different kinds of displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. In addition to differentiating between Islamic and liberal feminist movements, this paper also differentiates between Islamic feminists and the Islamist members of political parties who use Islamic law to oppress women rather than reinterpreting it to argue for greater rights for women. Finally, the paper concludes by examining the future of feminist movements in Iraqi in light of the Arab Spring, the withdrawal of U.S. troops, and the increasingly authoritarian Iraqi government.
This thesis would not have been possibly without insight from my thesis mentor Dr. John O. Voll, who introduced me to social movement theory and scholarship on Islamic feminism.

I would also like to thank my family for supporting me even though I didn't want to "do something normal like study abroad in France."

This is dedicated to my husband who never failed to encourage me and kept me sane while I was finishing this project.
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INTRODUCTION

"Liberated" Iraqi women organize for change

"You are free. The torture chambers and the rape rooms have been shut down. In their place, as you noted, grassroots organizations and women's self-help centers are blossoming from Baghdad to Babylon, from Basra and beyond," Colin Powell told Iraqi women at an address on International Women's Day in 2004. Powell went on to announce the launch of two programs for Iraqi women: The Women's Democracy Initiative and the U.S.-Iraqi Women's Network. Both programs were designed to "empower" women by involving them in the political process or by helping them start economic projects.\(^1\) The democracy initiative and the women's network are just two of the many projects the United States started to benefit Iraqi women. Since United States government officials said women's liberation was both a goal and a success of the invasion of Iraq, it is important to examine whether or not this has been the case.

Recent literature has proven that despite the establishment of programs like The Women's Democracy Initiative, Iraqi women were not "free" after the United States invaded.\(^2\) However, Powell was correct in asserting that grassroots organizations sprang up to work on behalf of women's rights. The media, academics, and organizations like Human Rights Watch, have drawn attention to the violence and discrimination women

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continue to face in Iraq. However, less work has been done on how Iraqi women's organizations have responded to these challenges. To my knowledge, scholars have not yet examined Iraqi feminism as a social movement nor addressed how Islamic feminism has developed in Iraq.

These represent critical gaps in scholarship because Islamic feminism has been hailed as the "only" feminism to which the majority of Muslims can relate,³ and because social movement theory provides a powerful tool for analyzing movements like feminism and the organizations that are part of these movements. Regardless of whether or not Islamic feminism is the only feminism that can gain credibility in Muslim-majority countries, it is a powerful movement that offers an alternative to traditional feminism by basing calls for women's rights in the Qur'an and the Sunna. Scholars have examined Islamic feminism in Egypt, Morocco, Iran, Nigeria, Yemen, and other countries, but have not yet examined the movement in Iraq. Studying Islamic feminism in Iraq could tell us how this feminist movement develops when a country is creating a new political system or is in the midst of a sectarian conflict.

Using social movement theory to study women's organizations can determine whether or not these organizations form a unified social movement and how they campaign for women's rights. Charles Tilly's definition of a social movement clearly defines a social movement and distinguishes between a social movement and an organization or a cause. He defines a social movement as a form of politics in which

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people come together to push for change that would upset the existing power structure. To do this as a part of a social movement, Tilly says that people must participate in a sustained campaign that includes various performances like rallies or petition drives, and displays worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (referred to as WUNC displays). To help clarify what WUNC displays are, Tilly gives examples of how a movement could display worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. A movement could reflect worthiness by campaigning with a sober demeanor and finding dignitaries or clergy members to support the cause. Unity could be reflected by matching clothing or chanting and marching together. Signatures on a petition or participants at a protest could be used to measure numbers. Commitment could be displayed by continuing to protest over a long period of time or under difficult conditions. These WUNC displays are examples of concrete action that participants in social movements can take to pressure those in power to meet their demands.4

Tilly's definition of a social movement is useful because it defines a social movement clearly and distinguishes social movements from other organizations or forms of political expression. Tilly clearly states that a social movement is not any one organization, but rather the collective action of people in various organizations. He also distinguishes between a social movement and an isolated protest by requiring that a social movement involve a sustained campaign with WUNC displays. Working with this definition is useful because it allows scholars to communicate with specific language.

about social movements and avoid confusion about what qualifies as a movement or what kinds of activities make up social movement participation.

**Studying women's movements in Iraq**

The last several decades of feminist literature have pointed out common flaws in traditional feminist scholarship that need to be addressed before analyzing Iraqi women's movements. Scholars from westernized countries who write about women or feminism in the Middle East must be careful to avoid objectifying the women they analyze and assuming Western values and standards are the norm against which other values and standards ought to be measured. In a desire to create a unified, international feminist movement, some scholars have failed to question how women's rights are defined or how issues of class, race, or religious difference might impact which rights women choose to prioritize.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes this kind of scholarship as a form of "discoursive colonization" in which scholars codify and appropriate "scholarship and knowledge about women in the Third World through the use of particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject that take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the United States and Western Europe."\(^5\)

Mohanty argues that there is a connection between feminist scholarship and feminist practice because scholarship can either challenge or uphold the assumptions on which feminist work is based. Scholarship that fails to challenge assumptions that Western

definitions of human rights are the only applicable ones or that Third World Women are in need of saving will "distort Western feminist political practices and limit the possibilities of coalitions among (usually white) Western feminists, working-class feminists, and feminists of color around the world." In order to avoid contributing to this kind of scholarship, I have chosen to look at both liberal feminism and Islamic feminism. Rather than assuming women's rights should be based in international norms that have been heavily influenced by traditional Western values, Islamic feminism defines women's rights using Islamic law.

Mohanty also criticizes feminist scholarship that portrays women from Third World countries as either homogenous or powerless victims of oppression. It is easy for literature about Iraqi women to fall into this trap. In an effort to draw attention to the problems Iraqi women have faced as a result of wars and sanctions, scholars tend to portray them primarily as victims of violence. According to Mohanty, the problem is not "universal grouping for descriptive purposes", but when the group becomes "a homogenous sociological grouping characterized by common dependencies (or even strengths)". When scholars use broad groups for analysis, they run the risk of making generalizations that are inaccurate or of offering only vague analysis. Aside from bad scholarship, these practices also contribute to a narrative that women of the Third World are victims in need of saving, rather than people capable of acting in their own interests.

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7 Ibid., 25.
In order to avoid this kind of analysis, I have attempted to differentiate among Iraqi women and to focus on how they have been active in social movements. Besides distinguishing between liberal and Islamic feminists, I also analyze the behavior of members of Iraq's parliament to demonstrate how they have reacted to the demands of women's organizations in a variety of ways. I also draw attention to the variety of ways Iraqi feminist activists have interacted with international organizations like the United Nations or with the United States government. By making these distinctions I hope to make it clear that Iraqi women are far from homogenous and their actions demonstrate their various values and priorities.

To avoid speaking for Iraqi women and portraying them as passive rather than active agents, I use quotes from Iraqi women's rights activists and focus on Iraqi feminist movements as social movements. I draw on media sources, my own interviews with Iraqi feminists, and interviews by other scholars to support the claims I make with evidence from Iraqi women. By doing this, I hope to allow Iraqi women to speak for themselves and define their own priorities. I also focus on Iraqi women's rights activists and the development of feminist movements in Iraq to emphasize that Iraqi women have not been passive victims of violence, but have worked to provide services for one another and influence the government and legal institutions. By using social movement theory to analyze feminist movements in Iraq, I hope to draw attention to how women in these movements have articulated claims, responded to international actors, and defined women's rights.
Finally, while it is important to avoid a one-size fits all formula for women's rights, it is equally important not to produce scholarship that allows cultural relativism to provide a justification for the mistreatment and oppression of women. Haideh Moghissi argues that what women have achieved in Western Europe and the United States is "an elementary formal standing as legal agents" and "a minimum protection against physical brutality." Like Moghissi, I believe that arguing such basic rights are not indigenous to Muslim or Arab culture is as insulting as any of the statements made by Orientalists to demonize those they colonized. It assumes that "feminism is and must remain the privileged domain of women in the West" and dismisses Arab and Muslim women who have worked for greater rights as pawns in an imperialist project, implying they would have been incapable of demanding these rights were it not for Western intervention. Therefore, I distinguish between those who advocate for greater women's rights based on a reinterpretation of the Qur'an and those who argue that women's rights should fit conservative interpretations Islamic law. Men and women who use Islamic law to justify forced marriages, domestic violence, and the complete seclusion of women from public spaces are not Islamic feminists. They are simply using conservative interpretations of Islam to justify misogyny.

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9 Ibid., 6 and 62-63.
The status of Iraqi women before 2003

Before the United States invaded Iraq, Saddam Hussein's regime made it impossible to protest against the state or organize independently of it. While small-scale charity organizations could work, the state cracked down on organizations that were not part of the Ba'ath party. During this time, the only women's organization Iraqi women were allowed to join was the General Federation of Iraqi Women, whose function was to mobilize Iraqi women "to fight against imperialism, Zionism, reactionary trends, and backwardness."  

Though women were not allowed to organize or make claims against the state, Iraqi women enjoyed some of the most liberal laws in the region at the time. The personal status law stated that a woman could not be legally married before the age of fifteen, and if she was not yet eighteen, a judge must approve the marriage. Forced marriages were made illegal and restrictions were placed on polygamy, requiring a judge to approve a man's proposal to take a second wife. The law also expanded the reasons for which women could seek divorce to include "injury and familial discord." It also allowed women greater custody rights. In addition to enjoying comparatively greater personal status rights, women were also encourage to work outside the home. In the 1980s, Iraqi

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women made up 46 percent of teachers, 29 percent of physicians, and 46 percent of dentists in Iraq.\textsuperscript{12}

However the impact of wars and sanctions changed the position of Iraqi women dramatically. The wars left more women as heads of households, tasked not only with making a living, but also with raising children and managing the household, including purchasing necessary goods and services. Even when men were present, women often took on additional work to help make ends meet.\textsuperscript{13} The bombing during the first Gulf War took out much of the sewage and electricity infrastructure, making it more time-consuming and difficult for women to manage a household, prompting many women to leave their jobs.\textsuperscript{14} As the economy worsened, jobs became scarcer and the government took steps to ensure men were given priority in the workplace. In 1998, the government dismissed females working as secretaries in government agencies, and in 2000 the government further restricted the ability of women to work in state ministries.\textsuperscript{15} Women who did continue working found they no longer had the financial independence they once enjoyed. Because of rising inflation, "young women in big cities, who had enjoyed

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\textsuperscript{12} Saeid N. Neshat, "A Look into the Women's Movement in Iraq," \textit{Farzaneh} 6, no. 11 (Spring 2003): 56.


\end{flushleft}
financial independence on a salary of around $400 a month for a few years, suddenly found that their real wages were reduced to less than $2 a month.\textsuperscript{16}

Women in Iraqi Kurdistan dealt with a very different situation since the region became an autonomous region with the imposition of the no-fly zone in 1991. Kurdish women had been active in supporting the struggle for Kurdish statehood and were recruited by the major Kurdish political parties. Kurdish women formed the Women's Union of Kurdistan after the Anfal campaign, an ethnic cleansing operation by Saddam's government that killed at least 50,000 Kurds from 1987 through 1988. The organization aimed to support both the Kurdish struggle for statehood and to support the rights of Kurdish women. While women's rights were generally overshadowed by the struggle for independence, Kurdish women did serve in parliament beginning in the 1990s and had more opportunities for leadership than women in central and southern Iraq.\textsuperscript{17}

The no-fly zone over the Kurdish region also allowed NGOs to operate without the restrictions imposed by Saddam Hussein's totalitarian regime. Women's organizations were able to forge connections with international organizations and benefit from the extra funding and resources this provided. Kurdish women were able to set up shelters for abused women and convince the government to outlaw honor killings. However, the government was, and remains, both unable and unwilling to effectively enforce the law against honor killings. The rivalry between the Kurdish political parties also limited the ability of women to organize and campaign for greater rights. Even today, with the treaty

\textsuperscript{16} Saeid N. Neshat, "A Look into the Women's Movement in Iraq," 59.

\textsuperscript{17} Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, \textit{What Kind of Liberation}, 44-45.
between the two major political parties and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, political rivalries continue to impede the work of women's rights activists in Iraqi Kurdistan.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Iraqi women organize after the US invasion}

After the invasion in 2003, hundreds of Iraqi women's movements sprang into existence. Some of the organizations were formed by women in certain neighborhoods to provide humanitarian relief to those around them. They provided services like mobile healthcare clinics and vocational training to women and their families. Others were more political in nature and pushed for democratic reforms, greater rights for women, or stricter adherence to Islamic laws. Because women formed so many organizations with such a variety of goals, it may appear that there is no unified Iraqi women's rights movement. However, Tilly's definition of a social movement allows a movement to include various organizations that do not always agree with one another. He argues against analyzing a social movement as a "unitary actor" and ignoring the "incessant jockeying and realignment that always goes on within movements."\textsuperscript{19} Tilly does not expect a movement to consist of organizations that are completely unified and homogenous; instead, he defines a movement as series of campaigns for a goal that includes displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.

Based on Tilly's definition, there are two discernable feminist movements in Iraq that are distinct from the groups providing humanitarian relief to women and from the

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 50-52.

women in political parties. The liberal feminist movement includes organizations that define women's rights according to international norms and standards, and can often agree with Western-based NGOs about what constitutes women's rights. The liberal feminist movement has been the subject of the bulk of research on Iraqi women's movements. It is relatively well established and internationally recognized, even if it is sometimes in conflict with international actors. There is also an emerging Islamic feminist movement in Iraq. Though this movement is not as well documented as similar movements in other Muslim-majority countries, it has established itself as distinct from the Islamist political parties and the secular women's movement.

Because of the greater availability of literature on the Iraqi liberal feminist movement, the first two chapters of this thesis will focus on how the liberal feminist movement has developed since 2003. I will demonstrate that despite the abundance of Iraqi women's organizations, there is a single liberal feminist movement that is unified in its goals and campaign strategies. The first chapter will analyze how members of this movement have worked with the international community, including the United States government, as well as the United Nations and other international NGOs. Organizations within the liberal feminist movement struggled to maintain independence from international actors and overcome the perception that they were part of an imperial or colonial feminism that used the promotion of women's rights to justify eroding cultural traditions and national independence. Although organizations within the liberal feminist movement negotiated these challenges in different ways, they remained part of a unified movement.
In the second chapter, I examine how the liberal feminist movement has petitioned the Iraqi government for greater women's rights. The movement demonstrated its unity by mounting sustained campaigns for changes to the Iraqi constitution and for greater leadership roles for women. The organizations within the movement engaged in WUNC displays that fit Tilly's definition of a social movement and distinguish the liberal feminist movement from women's relief organizations or political parties.

The third chapter will focus on the emerging Islamic feminist movement in Iraq. I begin by defining Islamic feminism and demonstrating why it is a separate movement from liberal feminism. Islamic feminists not only articulate a different set of goals, but they also use different cultural frames to make their movement resonate with Iraqi society. Using interviews with Iraqi feminists, both liberal and Islamic, I explore how the two movements have interacted with one another and developed agendas that are sometimes in competition. Despite the different goals of the Islamic and liberal feminist movements, I argue that it is important to see that Islamic and liberal are fluid categories and women can justify their calls for greater rights in the ideologies of both movements. Finally, I distinguish between Islamic feminists and the men and women who use conservative interpretations of Islamic law to oppose expanding women's rights. Many of the women affiliated with Islamist political parties, for example, use Islam to justify the oppression of women instead of reinterpreting the Qur'an and Sunna to support greater rights for women.

I end the paper by discussing how the Arab Spring and the withdrawal of U.S. troops has impacted Iraq's feminist movements. Greater violence and instability has made
it more difficult for Iraqi social movements to organize and make demands of the state. Previous periods of high violence were particularly damaging to women's movements in the past because women were more likely to be abducted or assassinated. Iraqi feminists are also dealing with an increasingly authoritarian government that has given no indication that its leaders will acquiesce to women's demands for more leadership positions and greater influence in politics. Finally, while Islamic feminism has been a unifying force in many Muslim majority-countries, Iraq's history of war and sectarian conflict suggest it may be less able to inspire a powerful, unified movement for women's rights. Unfortunately, the violence and authoritarian government in Iraq leave little room for hope that the state will support greater rights for women, whether those rights are defined by liberal feminists, Islamic feminists, or some coalition of the two.
CHAPTER 1
IRAQI FEMINISTS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Introduction

In the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the sanctions imposed by the United Nations, Iraq became increasingly isolated from the Western world. The no-fly zone over much of the country limited travel and sanctions crippled trade and increased poverty. Although the oil for food program allowed more goods to flow into Iraq, Saddam Hussein ensured those goods were primarily distributed to his supporters. Areas of opposition received little access to imported goods and humanitarian aid.¹

This relative isolation ended when the United States invaded in March of 2003. Within a year, an estimated 5,000 foreigners were living in Baghdad's Green Zone. Most of those people were government workers or contractors from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries in the coalition the United States assembled before the war. However, hundreds of people from various NGOs and the United Nations also entered the country.² Members of the foreign governments and international organizations in Iraq focused on a number of issues including security, governance, and humanitarian aid. A significant number of NGOs and government workers also focused on women's rights. For example, the international women's rights


² David Blair, "UN returns to Iraq with expanded new mission," The Telegraph, August 11, 2007. The United Nations pulled most of its international staff out of Iraq after an attack on its headquarters killed 22 people. The staff continued to work from Jordan until 2007, when organization began increasing its presence in Iraq again, see.
organization MADRE began working with Iraqi women's rights activists and the U.S. State Department launched the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative, with a budget of more than $24 million.\(^3\)

With such a dramatic increase in international attention to Iraqi women's rights, the liberal Iraqi feminist movement was faced with both opportunities and challenges. Greater international attention led to greater availability of money and expertise for Iraqi women. The United Nations Development Program organized training programs to teach police officers how to respond to gender based violence.\(^4\) A number of NGOs have hosted conferences on women's rights and donated money to local women's organizations. However, greater international involvement has also created a number of challenges for the liberal Iraqi women's rights movement. The international organizations and foreign governments that began working in Iraq had their own agendas, which influenced the way they worked in Iraqi politics and with local women's organizations.

**The United States sacrifices women's rights for quick transition to Iraqi rule**

Most obviously, the United States government and other governments of coalition sates wanted to see a quick transition to a stable, Iraqi government. The Bush administration had expressed opposition to large-scale peacekeeping operations and had


planned to invade and occupy Iraq with as few American personnel as possible. The administration failed to anticipate that most of Iraq's institutions would collapse during the war, and had expected to rely on Iraqis to manage much of the administrative, peacekeeping, and reconstruction tasks.⁵

Although the realities on the ground did not live up to the administration's expectations, a quick transition to Iraqi sovereignty remained the goal. Paul Bremer headed the Coalition Provision Authority in Iraq from May 2003 to June 2004, when sovereignty was handed over to the Iraqi Interim Government. As the insurgency began to take shape, he was under increasing pressure from Bush administration officials to quickly transition more authority to an Iraqi government. During a visit to Washington in October of 2003, Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and officials from the Department of Defense all expressed concern that the US occupation was building resentment among Iraqis and risking United States involvement in a civil war. They all urged Bremer to find a way to speed up the transition to an Iraqi government.⁶

The US government's interest in a quick transition to a stable Iraqi government often conflicted with the agenda of Iraq's liberal feminist movement. The movement called for a greater role for women in government and for a secular government that would not impose a conservative interpretation of Islamic law on women. While the U.S. government voiced support for these objectives, it failed to support them when U.S.


government officials feared such support would slow transition to Iraqi rule or upset key Iraqi leaders.

As the United States formed the transitional Iraqi government, it did little to include women in the process. On April 15, 2003, the coalition government organized a conference in Nasariyah on moving towards a transitional government. While more than 80 delegates attended this conference, just one woman was invited. Another meeting was held in May, and this time just six women were invited. Meanwhile, the United States, the United Nations, and male Iraqi leaders were conducting close-door negotiations to determine who would be included in the Iraqi Governing Council, which was formed in July 2003. The council included 25 Iraqis, but just three women. Instead of focusing on enabling women to play a role in Iraq's government, the United States government focused on providing "sectarian balance." The council included 12 Shias, five Sunnis, five Kurds, one Turkmen and one Christian. A gender consultant based in the United Kingdom said the United States did not prioritize including women in the process of transitioning to Iraqi sovereignty. She told scholars Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt that American officials were unenthusiastic about including women in the Iraqi Governing Council. "They thought it was a nice idea, but it wasn't a priority for them." When it came time to draft Iraq's constitution, the United States again demonstrated that a timely transition to Iraqi sovereignty was the first priority. The

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8 Ibid., 90-91.

United States pushed the committee drafting the constitution to meet a deadline of August 15, 2005. As a result, many key provisions were left vaguely worded with a plan to iron out the details later.\(^\text{10}\) According to scholar Nathan Brown, "Instead of adding clauses to satisfy various groups, the constitution was stripped of some of its provisions; those that were maintained abdicated much of the responsibility of providing strict instructions to future Iraqi political leaders."\(^\text{11}\) The constitution left articles on the role of Islam and the personal status laws so vaguely worded that future legislative action would certainly be required to clarify how the provisions of the constitution would operate in practice.

By endorsing such a vague constitution, the United States passed up an opportunity to provide constitutional protection for women's rights, and instead left protection of those rights to the whims of future leaders. Article 41 of the constitution, the article on the personal status law, states that "Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religions, sects, beliefs, or choices, and this shall be regulated by law."\(^\text{12}\) Iraqi women's rights activists have expressed concern that Article 41 would end the civil system that allowed women certain privileges in divorce and child custody, and it remains unclear whether or not this will be the case. A report on the law


by the American Bar Association indicates that the article could result in several systems: a system in which religious courts attempt to resolve disputes before they are then turned over to civil courts, a system with multiple court systems that would allow litigants to choose which court system to use, or a system in which personal status issues are never clearly codified at a national level. This could mean that women continue to enjoy the rights provided to them in Iraq's previous personal status law, or that women are subject to religious cleric's interpretation of Sharia.

The failure of the US government to push for a constitution that clearly enshrined the rights of Iraqi women or to ensure that Iraqi women had adequate representation in planning Iraq's new government indicates that the United States was placing its own agenda above Iraqi women's rights. American officials were willing to make concessions on women's rights in order to see the quickest possible transition to Iraqi sovereignty.

**Democracy promotion efforts outweigh concerns of Iraqi women**

The United States was not alone in its pursuit of an agenda that differed from that of liberal feminists in Iraq. The United Nations and other international NGOs often put issues like democracy promotion above the concerns articulated by Iraqi women. International organizations hosted a variety of conferences and seminars to teach Iraqi women how to exercise democratic rights. The Global Justice Center, a human rights organization based in New York, coordinated with the Women's Alliance for a

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Democratic Iraq to host a conference in Jordan called "Iraqi Women's Rights and International Law" in 2006. Three other NGOs – the Independent Women's Forum, the American Islamic Conference, and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies – formed the Iraqi Women's Educational Institute to educate women on participating in democratic government. A report from the institute stated that its work from 2004 to 2007 "centered on promoting women's participation in Iraqi society. Activities centered on entrepreneurship, elections, the drafting of the constitution, and the building of civil society institutions."\(^\text{14}\)

The United Nations has also hosted many conferences about women's rights and democracy in Iraq, such as a conference in 2010 that included government leaders and Iraqi women's rights advocates.\(^\text{15}\)

While the impulse to help Iraqi women participate in government is admirable, and in keeping with the goals of members of the liberal feminist movement, international organizations often spent money on democracy promotion initiatives rather than on the humanitarian projects Iraqi women activists recommended. Several women's rights activists expressed their frustration with the emphasis on democracy promotion activities. One woman said, "I keep telling them: Please stop funding democracy training! We have had enough of meetings in five-star hotels in Amman where we meet one expert from the outside. The money spent on a one-day conference could be used to build a water-
cleaning facility in Iraq.”

Women also complained that money from the United Nations and other international NGOs never reached the local level. Iraqi women's activists said international actors were plagued by corruption and failed to manage projects appropriately. A woman's rights activists said:

These international agencies are like a mafia. They have their channels, and if you have the right connections you get funding. They don't want Iraqis to build their own capacity. I even heard of people who managed to get funding for their proposals by paying commission to intermediaries to the EU commission or the UN. And there are lots of false contracts and proposals with no proper follow-up.

Despite the presence of corruption, foreign governments and international actors were attempting to provide support to Iraqi women at the grassroots level. Members of the US military's provincial reconstruction teams organized meetings between local women's committees and government officials. One such meeting occurred in Mahmoudiya, south of Baghdad, in May of 2008. US forces told news agencies that the purposes of these meetings was to "get women involved in government" and provide them with better economic opportunities. However, Iraqi women who participated in the meeting said that much of the aid US forces had offered failed to reach the local level. They also called for greater economic assistance, particularly for women and orphans.

Regardless of the intentions of international actors, Iraqi women's activists voiced

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17 Ibid, 147.

frustration with the corruption, inefficiency, and the competing agendas of the various entities working Iraq. Democracy promotion did not necessarily conflict with the ideology or long-term goals of the liberal women's rights movement in Iraq, but it did conflict with the movement's priorities and short-term goals. By making democracy promotion such a high priority, NGOs were demonstrating that their own agendas took priority over the agenda articulated by members of Iraq's liberal feminist movement.

*Imperial feminism in the new Iraq*

By putting their own agendas ahead of those of Iraqi women while simultaneously claiming to help Iraqi women, foreign governments and NGOs in Iraq suffered from imperial feminism. They grouped women of Iraq together and assumed the standards of the West are those that ought to be emulated by the rest of the world. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar criticized Western feminist scholarship for using "Western social and economic systems to judge and make pronouncements about how Third World women can become emancipated," as well as for portraying Third World women as "politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism."\(^\text{19}\) It seems many political officials and international human rights activists in Iraq internalized the discourse Amos and Parmar criticized and found it necessary to "school" Iraqi women in Western systems of government. The emphasis on democracy promotion and human rights at the expense of the humanitarian projects Iraqi women called for is evidence of international actors assuming they understood what Iraqi women

needed better than Iraqi women themselves.

The problem is not that the Western conception of women's rights is necessarily incorrect, but that this discourse assumes it is the superior definition and the rights of Iraqi women ought to be measured against those of women in the United States or Western Europe. Instead of listening to the demands voiced by Iraqi women, some international actors defined the needs of Iraqi women for them and distributed resources accordingly. One Iraqi women's rights activist said:

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 a poor woman in the countryside about her legal rights if she's worried about finding medicine for her sick son?20

This woman's statement indicates that foreign governments and international organizations funding the Iraqi women's movement were making two problematic assumptions. First, they assumed that the political projects they saw as important should receive funding priority over the humanitarian projects that Iraqi women wanted prioritized. This indicates that they felt comfortable acting as though they knew best what Iraqi women needed. Second, they assumed that the ideals of democracy and human rights were universally acceptable and Iraqi women should be appropriately educated so these ideals could be put into practice.

These flawed assumptions were not based simply on ignorance of the situation on the ground. Iraqi women spoke to high-level officials, including Paul Bremer, about their

20 Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What Kind of Liberation, 129.
needs. Hanaa Edwar, the secretary-general of the Iraqi al-Amal Association, spoke to Bremer when he met with several Iraqi women's activists in 2004. "Hanna Edwar went through a long list of criticism and demands, including our demand to stop the military assaults in Fallujah and Najaf. She was so brave! You should have seen Bremer's face; it was getting redder and redder."²¹ Needless to say, the U.S. military did not stop assaults on Fallujah and Najaf due to the concerns Edwar articulated about women in those areas. The account of her meeting with Bremer indicated that the U.S. government was aware of the demands of Iraqi women's rights activists, and interested in fulfilling those demands only as long as they did not conflict with perceived American interests.

**Occupation in light of colonialism**

In addition to responding to the challenges posed by various international actor's competing agendas, the secular Iraqi women's right movement also had to contend with the perception that it was working to further American attempts to undermine Iraqi culture. Because "liberating women" was part of the justification for invasion, Iraqi women faced accusations that they were instruments of the United States or "the West", forcing alien values on Iraqi society. The U.S. invasion of Iraq became part of a larger narrative of women as objects of resistance or submission to a foreign power when the United States began touting women's rights as one reason for the invasion. Before the invasion began, Paula Dobriansky, the Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, led a press conference called "Human Rights and Women in Iraq: Voices of Iraqi Women," during which Iraqi women recounted the suffering they experienced under Saddam

Hussein. The media picked up the call and several news outlets ran stories describing the abuse Iraqi women experienced under Hussein's regime. These writers and politicians hailed the coming invasion as an opportunity to liberate and empower Iraqi women. This kind of rhetoric is similar to that used by the British when justifying the occupation of Egypt or India, or the French when justifying the occupation of Algeria.

As European powers colonized much of the Middle East, scholars began examining the influence colonialism had on depictions of women as either oppressed or liberated, and on whether or not Islam was compatible with women's rights. Rosemary Sayigh argues that colonizers portrayed Arab women as "backwards" and "oppressed", making the colonizers into the "civilized" people and colonial subjects into the "backwards" people. In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Leila Ahmed describes how the British used this rhetoric while occupying Egypt, decrying traditions such as veiling and secluding women. Lord Cromer and other British officials used the status of women in Egypt as part of the justification for colonialism, creating what Ahmed called "colonial feminism", where the colonial power

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argued that "progress for women could be achieved only through abandoning the native culture."  

This kind of rhetoric from colonial powers tied the role of women to debates about colonialism and nationalism, making women examples used by both sides to justify their position, and making women symbols of either resistance or submission to foreign intervention. The rhetoric of colonial powers used to discuss women in the countries they colonized has been seen as part of the greater colonial project, and thus as part of a desire to "sap the strength of the Muslim people."  

As a result, women's issues became an area of contention between foreign powers intervening in the Middle East and indigenous groups trying to resist that intervention. Valentine Moghadam describes how political and cultural movements that focus on liberation or resistance often revive "traditional" interpretations of the role of women. Women are seen as the ones that embody and preserve the religious and national culture in the face of a threat from a foreign power.  

Women are assigned the role of guardians of tradition or vehicles of colonial power in cases of direct colonization as well as cases where a society felt under attack by imperial powers. Nayereh Tohidi describes the conflict Iranian women faced when the Shah's regime pushed them towards modernization even as much of society denounced this "Western" behavior. Women who adopted too many aspects of Western culture were

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26 Ibid., 244.


seen as "Westoxified", meaning they were being controlled by the "toxic" culture of the West and were now devoid of their own identity or culture. These "Westoxified" women were seen as the doorway through which imperial powers entered and then controlled society.

This kind of rhetoric did not end in the 20th century. In Morocco, opponents of the women's rights movement painted feminists as part of a "Francophone elite." The Moroccan feminists had to prove that they were not "instruments of imperialism," despite the fact that Morocco was no longer under occupation by a foreign power. In light of the US.. invasion, Iraqi women's rights groups were even more vulnerable to the criticism that they were imposing alien values and weakening authentic Iraqi culture. Those who opposed the liberal Iraqi women's rights movement argued that the movement undermined authentic Iraqi values by encouraging women to be active outside the home or by making the veil a choice instead of an obligation. "This is a Muslim country and any attack on a woman's modesty is also an attack on our religious beliefs," said Salah Ali, a senior Ministry of Interior official. Religious leaders also argued that "it is the


30 Ibid., 122.


Islamic duty of women to stay in their homes, looking after their children and husbands rather than searching for work.”

Militias also used mandatory veiling to symbolize their control of a certain area. If a militia could credibly threaten the safety of women who refused to stay veiled and indoors it indicated that the militia, not US forces, controlled the area. Women's rights activist Yanar Mohammed said:

“When an Islamist militia wants to take control of a neighborhood, imposing the veil on women is the first point on their agenda. It is their way of claiming power over the area. In Sadr City, you no longer see a single woman without the veil….When a political party gains control of an area, it puts its flag everywhere. The flag is a message to your opponents that this is your area and they should not dare to step into it. The veil on women is like a flag now.”

Women became symbols in a larger struggle to determine who controlled a particular area and what values would be imposed. The liberal feminist movement had to contend with women's symbolic role in addition to dealing with the conflicting agendas of international actors and imperial feminism.

Ibid.

Iraq's liberal women's movement responds to international pressures

Iraqi women's groups responded to the challenges posed by the increased activity of international organizations and foreign governments in various ways, including by determining how they received money and whether they voiced criticism of the United States. Despite these varied responses, the organizations of the liberal feminist movement articulated the same agenda and organized together. The movement's responses to these

Ibid.

challenges demonstrated that it remained unified in its desire to promote a version of women's rights grounded in secular laws and international norms.

Although some organizations refused to receive money from foreign actors, these organizations did not necessarily differ significantly in their goals. The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) refused to receive funding from foreign governments and questioned the notion that funding democracy training is beneficial. Houzan Mahmoud, a founding member of the organization said, "Other groups and societies take Western money, particularly US and UK government funds, and follow liberal agendas removed from helping women, wasting money and time to 'educate' Iraqi women and engage them in the process of transition to so-called democracy." Other organizations, with goals similar to that of OWFI, have received funding from the US government or solicited the support of US officials. USAID provided more than $500,000 in aid to the Rafadain Women's Coalition. Hanaa Edwar and Noof Assi of the Iraqi Al-Amal Association traveled to Washington in 2012 and met with officials in the State Department, USAID, and Congress.

Not all Iraqi women's groups were willing to be critical of America's values and policies. Some groups voiced concern about specific U.S. policies, while others voiced concern about mainstream American values. Members of OWFI were outspoken in their


criticism of the US government, the military occupation, capitalism, and imperialism. The organization issued a statement of support for the Occupy Wall Street movement on its website and criticized the United States' ongoing role in Iraqi politics. When US combat forces withdrew to American bases in 2010, OWFI President Yanar Mohammed said Iraqi forces were still carrying out the United State's "oppressive tactics" and the United States was still controlling Iraqi politics. The outspoken nature of members of the organization often left it at odds with the U.S. and Iraqi governments. Other organizations, like the Iraqi al-Amal Association, have chosen different tactics. Members of the organization criticize the United States on specific policies, but steer clear of broad attacks on capitalism and imperialism. For example, Haana Edwar criticized the United States for the light sentencing of US personnel accused of war crimes, while also visiting U.S. government officials and asking for their support.

Despite organizations' differing stances on issues like receiving foreign funding and criticizing the United States, Iraq's liberal movement remained unified enough to be considered a cohesive movement. The organizations within the movement maintained similar definitions of women's rights and had similar goals. OWFI, for instance, encouraged Iraqis to join the women's rights movement even if they did not take an interest in its anti-capitalism stance. Houzan Mahmoud said, "Our purpose isn’t to


indoctrinate women into Marxist theory; we want to raise awareness of women’s positions and subjugation in the male dominated society. We have young girls, older women, veiled women, and unveiled women... all sorts of females united to fight for women’s freedom."\textsuperscript{41} OWFI shares goals in common with other women's rights organizations that make up the liberal Iraqi women's rights movement. Like the Iraqi al-Amal Association, OWFI is looking to implement a more secular personal status law, decrease domestic violence, and ensure Iraq is safe for women to move freely around the country without a male relative.

The various organizations that comprise the liberal Iraqi feminist movement also engaged in similar campaigns and WUNC displays to achieve their goals. When the Iraqi Governing Council passed a decree proposing that Sharia law replace the personal status law established in 1959 the various organizations of the liberal Iraqi women's movement mobilized to prevent the decree from becoming law.\textsuperscript{42} The IGC passed the measure, called decree 137 in 2009. It stated that Iraq's former personal status law "should be replaced by Sharia and administered by clerics depending upon the sect to which the relevant parties belonged."\textsuperscript{43} Secular women's rights activists saw the change as a huge step backwards because it would allow for infringements on women's rights based on conservative interpretations of Sharia. For example, the civil law allowed for a daughter

\textsuperscript{41} Emily Muna,"Campaigning for Women's Rights in Iraq," \textit{Women's Fightback}, November 24, 2011.

\textsuperscript{42} The CPA established the Iraqi Governing Council in 2003 to provide advice on governing Iraq until sovereignty was transferred. It could pass legislation, but that legislation was subject to the approval of Paul Bremer.

\textsuperscript{43} Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, \textit{What Kind of Liberation}, 93.
to inherit property, something not all interpretations of Sharia allow. It also limited polygamy by requiring a judge's approval in most instances and giving a woman the power to divorce her husband if he took a second wife without her permission.\footnote{Efrati, "Negotiating Rights in Iraq: Women and the Personal Status Law," \textit{The Middle East Journal} 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 577-595.}

Members of the IGC saw the decree as an opportunity to assert the council's relevance and repeal a law that undermined religious leaders. The council included many conservative Shia leaders who believed that Saddam's nationalist and socialist policies had undermined the role of religion. They believed passing the decree would help reassert religion's role in society.\footnote{Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, \textit{What Kind of Liberation}, 93-49.}

Iraqi women were divided on the issue. About 500 women in Najaf rallied to support the measure, but it was not just popular among Shia women. Sokayna al-Sumaydie, a Sunni woman demonstrating in support of the decree told Al-Jazeera, "Sharia guarantees the goodwill of people and sets standards for divorce, polygamy, and marriage. We cannot fight the orders of God. We refuse any law that calls for scrapping the Sharia law."\footnote{Al-Jazeera, "Iraqi women divided over family law," \textit{Al-Jazeera}, January 21, 2004.} However, the liberal Iraqi women's movement unified to campaign against the law using the series of WUNC displays that Charles Tilly describes as part of social movements. Women from more than 80 women's rights organizations demonstrated in Baghdad carrying signs denouncing sexism and the new law. Thousands of Kurdish women also demonstrated in Sulaimaniyah. In addition to the demonstrations,
women's rights activists sent letters of protest to the IGC and Paul Bremer. A women's rights activist at the demonstrations described the unity displayed at them, saying, "The women were of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. There were veiled women and unveiled ones. What united us was the fear of letting any of the increasingly more conservative and radical Islamists interpret Islamic law in a totally random way." Her quote demonstrates the movement's ability to unify and campaign for a specific objective.

The liberal women's rights movement did not display unity only in response to Decree 137. Organizations in the movement shared other goals and strategies in common. For example, the Iraqi al-Amal Association, ASUDA, and OWFI all operate shelters for female victims of domestic violence. ASUDA, the Iraqi al-Amal Association, and the Baghdad Women's Association have all conducted training to raise awareness among both men and women about women's legal rights. The organizations that participate in the liberal Iraqi women's rights movements also share a similar understanding of what women's rights entail. Various organizations within the movement have condemned honor crimes and domestic violence, and called for women to have a greater role in political decision-making.

Despite differences in the way Iraqi women responded to the international actors in Iraq, the secular women's rights movement demonstrated unity in its basic methods and goals. While not all organizations were willing to receive funding from the US government or the United Nations, most organizations received funding from some sort


48 Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What Kind of Liberation, 134.
of foreign NGO, such as OXFAM or MADRE. The movement's opposition to Decree 137 demonstrates unity in the goals of maintaining a secular civil code and ensuring women have a voice in political decisions. Tilly's definition of a social movement does not exclude the possibility that certain organizations within the movement will operate slightly differently, for example receiving money from certain entities and not others. However, similar goals and tactics allowed liberal Iraqi women's groups to come together to respond as a unified social movement to challenges.
CHAPTER 2
FEMINIST GROUPS ENGAGE IRAQI GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY

Introduction

Islam Abbas Faraj decided to enter politics after Iraqi security forces detained her husband on what she described as "politically-motivated" charges. Deciding it was time to change her life and the lives of others, she ran for a seat on Diyala's provincial council with the Sunni Islamic Party in January of 2009. She was too concerned for her safety to put her face on campaign posters, though she said security had improved in Diyala by the time she began her campaign. She campaigned with the men in her party and often made speeches to male and female audiences. In the village of al-Aswed she began her campaign speech by telling her entirely male audience, "If you intend to overlook my words because I am a woman, then I would rather not speak at all." She said the men instructed her to continue and then invited her to speak to the women in her village.1

Despite this and other favorable reactions for male audiences, Faraj said she remained unsure she could win the election. She said asking women to vote for another woman to represent their interests would not necessarily do her any good. "Whether the women will be allowed to vote independently or not is an unknown quantity in the equation," she said. "Some men will demand that the women of their family vote as they do, but at the end of the day she has the right, and it is up to them whether to use it independently or otherwise."2 Her statement is evidence that Iraqi women face

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2 Ibid.
complicated challenges from their own society, as well as from international actors. On paper, women have a quota in parliament and the ability to run for elected office. There is a Ministry of State for Women's Affairs and women's committees in the national parliament and the regional councils. In reality, women cannot always vote independently or safely, and the government institutions designed to help them may not be independent or truly committed to women's rights.

Like Faraj, Iraqi women's rights activists have struggled against entrenched power structures within Iraqi society to ensure women's rights exist on paper and in practice. The liberal feminist movement engaged the Iraqi government with the sustained campaigns and WUNC displays that Tilly uses to define a social movement. Activists involved in the liberal feminist movement campaigned to maintain the 1959 personal status law, give women greater representation in government, and keep women's organizations independent from the government. However, the movement has been only partially successful in getting the Iraqi government and society to meet its demands.

*Women's rights activists protest the constitution*

Because the Iraqi constitution gave Islam a prominent role in determining legislation and changed the personal status law, activists in the liberal feminist movement unified to oppose the constitution. Article 2 of the constitution states that Islam is "a foundation source of legislation" and that "no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam." 3 Liberal feminists were concerned that these vaguely

worded provisions could mean that all laws had to conform to a strict interpretation of Islamic law that would curtail women's rights. Women were also concerned about Article 41 of the constitution, the personal status law. The article states that "Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status according to their religions, sects, beliefs, or choices, and this shall be regulated by law."\(^4\) Women's rights activists worried that women would be forced to negotiate divorces and other personal status matters in religious courts, with no recourse to the state if these courts choose to apply a conservative interpretation of Islamic law that curtailed women's rights. A report by National Public Radio accurately described the concerns expressed by feminists:

So perhaps in the Kurdish north or some of the urban centers, there might be judges who would interpret that quite liberally - things about divorce, inheritance, child custody. But in more conservative parts of the country, in the Shiite south or parts of the Sunni triangle, the judges could be quite conservative.\(^5\)

Due to their concerns about the constitution, liberal feminists organized a sustained campaign to amend the problematic portions of the constitution. The campaign demonstrated the liberal feminist movement's unity and its use of the WUNC displays that Tilly says are critical to social movements.

Iraqi women strongly voiced their concerns about the constitution during the run-up to the constitutional referendum in 2005. Women's groups staged a series of demonstrations and protests while the drafting committee was working on the document. In July of 2005, about 200 men and women handed out fliers and held banners in the


Baghdad heat to protest limitations to women's rights that were being circulated in several drafts of the constitution. On August 14th, the day before the draft was due to be finished, women staged a sit-in at the convention center in Baghdad where the committee was drafting the constitution. Guards and red tape barred them from entering the center. Hanaa Edwar, the secretary general of the Iraqi al-Amal Association, described the sit-in:

As the tension mounted, the women began to sit on the floor, one by one, right under the red tape, linking their elbows and singing a traditional Iraqi song…eventually, the drafting committee agreed to meet with three of the women representing the group.

The sit-in included classic WUNC displays. The women demonstrated worthiness by singing a traditional Iraqi song to appeal to shared Iraqi heritage. They displayed unity and numbers by bringing so many women to a demonstration and linking arms beneath the red tape. They also displayed commitment by taking a seat and refusing to leave despite the heat.

Although the constitution passed, liberal feminists did not give up. They lobbied to ensure that objectionable portions of the document became part of the constitutional review process established in September 2006. About 150 women's rights organizations came together to sign a letter to US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. The letter urged the international community to support

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women's rights in Iraq, and criticized the constitutional review process for failing to quickly remove the changes to the personal status laws in Article 41.8

Despite the unity it maintained, the liberal feminist movement met with little success in amending the constitution to better protect Iraqi women's rights. Though the movement placed great pressure on members of the constitutional review committee, Article 41 was not changed. A women's rights activist in Baghdad said:

There was huge pressure by women activists to abolish Article 41, but we feel we have reached an impasse. We have had to compromise by offering amendments to 41, but they still refuse. There is not enough support from the U.N., international NGOs, and the media….We have managed to change the position of some political parties, including Fadila. We are working on the Sadrists. The most hardcore are SCIRI and Da'wa.9

Despite the unity the liberal feminist movement displayed, it remained unable to convince Iraqi political leaders to change their positions on Article 41.

**Women struggle for representation in government**

Even policies that seemed to promote women's rights often looked better on paper than they did in practice. Women's rights activists had to fight an uphill battle to ensure that 25 percent of the seats in Iraq's parliament would go to women because the CPA did not initially favor a gender quota. Before Iraq's constitution was finished, CPA officials said a gender quota was not on the table, even though it had favored using ethnic and sectarian quotas in forming previous government bodies. "They have seats for Shiites,

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9 Ibid., 118.
Sunnis, Kurds, Assyrians and they didn't think that they should have a seat for [half of] the country?" said Safia al-Suhail, a prominent female politician.\textsuperscript{10}

Women initially asked for an even greater role in government. Hanaa Edwar said she initially favored seeing 40 percent of decision-making positions go to women. Edwar helped organize sit-ins and appealed to international donors to draw attention to the organization's demands.\textsuperscript{11} However, the United States remained unenthusiastic about establishing a quota for women in government. One women's rights activist who attended a meeting with Paul Bremer, said:

We were determined to get involved in the new institutions and government. We knew that Iraqi male politicians, even the more progressive ones, would try to sideline us. But we make up more than half of the population! And we women have been holding together Iraqi society during all the years of suffering. But Bremer told us: "We don't do quotas." We were so angry, especially because the Americans had used quotas with respect to ethnic and religious groups in the Iraqi Governing Council. The British Ambassador, Jeremy Greenstock, was much more supportive. And we decided not to give up but continue our lobbying.\textsuperscript{12}

Facing resistance from Iraqi male politicians and the U.S. government, women were unable to achieve a quota granting them 40 percent of decision-making positions in the new government. However, the movement remained unified in its goals and continued to lobby the United States government and Iraqi politicians. Eventually a compromise was reached, and Iraqi women were granted 25 percent of all seats in elected bodies.


\textsuperscript{12} Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, \textit{What Kind of Liberation}, 130.
Many women's rights activists were disappointed with the results of their hard-won fight to ensure women were represented in parliament. Members of the liberal feminist movement consistently complained that women in parliament were doing little to advance women's rights because they were beholden to conservative parties, and selected because they would vote with the party rather than because they were best qualified to represent Iraqi women. One women's rights activist said the women elected to parliament in 2005 were placed there because of their relatives, not their experience:

"Most of the women who are in parliament or in the various ministries are the wives, daughters, and sisters of conservative Islamist politicians. They don't have any experience with politics, nor do they care about women's rights. In fact, I hardly see them open their mouths to say anything. When there is a vote for something, they first look at what the male politicians in their party vote for."

Another women's rights activist echoed her sentiments, saying that there were a few independent women in parliament "but there are not very many of them."

Hanaa Edwar said a member of her organization published a report in Arabic that tracked how female Iraqi politicians voted. She said the study found that women voted overwhelmingly with their party, even on legislation that curtailed the rights of women. "Men and women do not vote very differently because they are chosen by the heads of the political blocks, not because they are active in women's groups, but because of tribe or sect," Edwar said. Like other women's rights activists, she acknowledged that there are

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14 Ibid.
a few female parliamentarians who have worked for women's rights, but "there are not nearly enough."\(^{15}\)

The women in parliament had trouble working independently of their political parties on women's issues. Maysoun al-Damlouji, a Sunni lawmaker, said women had trouble caucusing together because they could only agree on two vague issues: that women should be educated and that violence against women should be stopped. "We disagreed on almost everything else," she said.\(^{16}\) After more than a year of effort, Iraqi women were able to establish a women's caucus in parliament. A member of parliament affiliated with the Kurdish PUK described the difficulties women experienced within the caucus:

We tried to talk with women in each bloc to get a unified caucus. But some women are under pressure from their political leadership. They are afraid. The male leaders are afraid that their women will be used by the West to undermine their political decisions. Also, some men still don't believe in women's rights. These are mostly Shi'i men, but there are some Sunni men that think like this.\(^{17}\)

Women in parliament were viewed as potential instruments of Western imperialism, as discussed in the previous chapter, and also faced difficulties coming together and working independently of their political parties.

Women's rights activists said the situation has only worsened since the 2010 elections. In 2008, the rules of Iraqi elections were changed so candidates had to put their names on ballots, rather than just run on party lists. Said Arikat, a spokesmen for the UN

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\(^{15}\) Hanaa Edwar, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 9, 2012.


\(^{17}\) Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, \textit{What Kind of Liberation}, 117.
mission in Iraq, said women sometimes "do not fare as well in open list elections." In Iraq, the open-list system discouraged many women from running because they feared for their own safety and the safety of their families. A teacher in Diyala province said she was considering running until she discovered the ballot would include her name, not just her party. "I feel that I am unprotected," she said. "I am not going to run in the elections because I fear for the safety of members of my family who might be targeted."  

Not only were Iraqi women nervous about running for parliament, but those who did win seats continued to vote along party lines. "They are still completely with the men," said Hanaa Edwar. Safia al-Suhail, a member of parliament, said most of the political parties did not groom women for leadership positions. Rather than give women positions within the party and assist in their campaigns, she said the party leadership picked female candidates at the last minute just to meet the quota. She told The New York Times:

> Many of those women who were chosen as part of the political parties were chosen because they were relatives of members of the party. The parties didn’t really think to have women inside the party itself, and just chose many of the women, like, two weeks before the election. This is what I meant exactly: there are not a lot of serious politicians.

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19 Ibid.


Just five of the 86 female parliamentarians were elected outright, the remaining 81 were selected by their parties to fill the quota.

Women are also struggling to gain political power outside of the parliament. After the 2010 parliamentary elections, Iraq's government was formed by closed-door negotiations rather than by transparent elections. Iyad Allawi's al-Iraqiyah party won the majority of votes, but fell short of the votes required to form a coalition that would unseat incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Iraq went without a government while al-Maliki and Allawi struggled to agree on the composition of a unity government. An agreement was eventually brokered, but women had no role in the negotiations. "We ended up with a power-sharing government that has all these party leaders rushing in to get their share of the pie, and the leaders are nearly all men," said Reidar Visser, a researcher and author with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.\textsuperscript{22}

As a result, there is just one female cabinet minister and she is in charge of the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs. The post has a history of being under-funded and under-staffed. The former Minister of State for Women's Affairs, Nawal al-Samarie, quit her post at one point because her budget was cut from $7,500 to $1,500 a month. She eventually returned after NGOs offered money to support the ministry.\textsuperscript{23} After the new government was formed in late 2010, Ibtihal al-Zaidi took over the post. She has recently come out in support of modifying Article 409 of Iraq's penal code so it no longer reduces

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

the sentence for men who commit so-called "honor crimes." However, members of Iraq's liberal feminist movement have said she is not a true champion of women's rights. They were disappointed by statements she made implying that husbands have the right to control their wives' freedom of movement. Liberal feminists also complained about her support for a law stating that women could not wear trousers to work.\textsuperscript{24} Hanaa Edwar said al-Zaidi was put in place by Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa party, and therefore could not operate truly independently.\textsuperscript{25}

Liberal feminists said the same problems exist in Iraqi Kurdistan, where even women's NGOs are often affiliated with one of the two Kurdish political parties: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) headed by Jalal Talabani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Massoud Barzani. One Kurdish women's rights activist said that organizations not affiliated with one of the political parties are "struggling to find a voice."\textsuperscript{26} Because of the historic and ongoing rivalry between the PUK and KDP, Iraqi Kurdistan is almost like two separate states with separate political parties and security forces. The PUK controls Sulaimaniyah and the KDP controls Erbil and Dohuk.\textsuperscript{27} Women's organizations find themselves struggling to negotiate the rivalry between the parties. One women's rights activist said a government official from the PUK cut her organization's funding, "so we went to Erbil to see Nechirvan Barzani, the

\textsuperscript{24} Noof Assi, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 9, 2012.

\textsuperscript{25} Hanaa Edwar, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 9, 2012.

\textsuperscript{26} Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, \textit{What Kind of Liberation}, 143.

\textsuperscript{27} David McDowall, \textit{A Modern History of the Kurds} (London: I.B. Tauris), 2007.
Kurdish prime minister who is part of the KDP. He was very supportive and told us that he would like to pay us, but it would become a problem between the two political parties. "28 Like the rivalries in central and southern Iraq, the political rivalries in Iraqi Kurdistan made it more difficult for women's rights activists to work.

**Power redistribution produces resistance to feminism**

The problem of women in Iraq's parliament and the rivalries between political parties demonstrate how difficult it is to legislate women's equality from the top down. It also demonstrates that Iraqi feminists are struggling against more than just backlash to imperial feminism and occupation. They are also struggling against existing patriarchal power structures. Badran has argued that resistance to women's rights from many men in the Middle East is not just Western imperialism, but also about the desire to maintain or gain power when it gets redistributed. Badran writes:

> Feminism, especially in stages of open activism, constituted uncomfortable challenges to masculinist scrambles to control the construction of modernity – its processes and its class and gender privileges….It has often been argued that women were made to constitute or preserve "the traditional" at moments when customary ways were in danger of disappearing. I think it was not so much that women should act as symbols of an endangered old order so that men could be less (culturally) anxiously "modern" as that women must not compete for the benefits of modernity and define it in egalitarian terms. 29

I disagree with Badran's analysis that backlash to feminism is not at all based in the perception that women are supposed to symbolize and maintain traditional cultural norms. However, I think she is correct in pointing out that the desire to receive a share of

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distributed power is an additional reason that some men resist women's rights. I think this is particularly true in a country like Iraq, where government was being restructured and political power was up for grabs after years were it was consolidated in the hands of Saddam Hussein and his cronies.

This was particularly evident in the way Iraqi male leaders responded to US efforts to form the Iraqi Governing Council, the Transitional National Assembly, and other bodies that worked with the CPA to transition authority to a sovereign Iraqi government. A Kurdish women's rights activist said the CPA reached out to the Kurdish leadership and asked them to select a Kurdish woman for the IGC.

But the Iraqi leaders weren’t ready to have us in the picture. They thought there was no place for women in the transition because this was a difficult period. The CPA wanted me to be part of the IGC as a Kurd, but the Kurdish leadership would not agree because they only had five places and they did not want to give one to a woman.30

Her quote indicates that the failure to include Iraqi women in the transition to Iraqi sovereignty was not just due to the United States' failure to push the issue. It was also due to reluctance on the part of Kurdish men to relinquish political power to a Kurdish woman. Iraqi male leaders continued to display this reluctance after the transition to Iraqi sovereignty when they picked women to fill the parliamentary quota at the last minute, rather than incorporating them into the party leadership structures.

Women were also left out of the closed-door negotiations that distributed power in the most recent government. After the 2010 parliamentary elections, when both Nouri al-Maliki and Iyad Allawi claimed the right to form the Iraqi government, the male

leadership of both parties conducted negotiations. Ultimately, the new government was formed as part of a deal brokered by Kurdish president Masoud Barzani, rather than at the ballot box or within the parliament, where women were legally guaranteed at least some presence. Maliki then formed his current cabinet, which includes just one woman as Minister of State for Women's Affairs. A female member of the Kurdish bloc in parliament said the power-sharing agreement was "a complete disaster" for women's rights. "Democracy should also include women, and the rights of women should be developed as the democracy here develops," she said. "But what’s actually happened is that the rights of women have gotten worse over time."31 As men compete for political power, in the form of cabinet ministries or leadership in political parties, they often resist including women lest these women take some of the limited leadership positions. By leaving women out of negotiations and the party leadership structure, they ensure women will lack the experience and the opportunity to lobby successfully for political power.

**Kurdish rights divide Iraqi women**

The Iraqi feminist movement has also struggled to maintain unity in the face of disputes among Kurds and other Iraqis over Kurdish rights. The issue surfaced with the constitution, when many Kurdish women's rights activists were torn on whether or not to endorse the document. The Kurdish leadership hailed it as a victory because it allowed for an autonomous Kurdish region and left room for negotiations on the status of

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However, women's rights activists were concerned with the role of Islam in the constitution and the adjustments to the personal status law. Kurdish women were left struggling to choose whether to prioritize their ethnic or gender identities. One Kurdish activist said:

The Kurdish leaders encouraged people to vote for the constitution because it was positive for Kurdish rights. I went to vote and voted 'no.' My brother tried to change my mind. Most women activists were angry with the constitution, but some women were influenced by the campaigns and changed their minds.33

Kurdish women were under pressure to favor Kurdish rights over women's rights, which may have limited their ability to unify with the Iraqi feminist movement and campaign against certain provisions of the constitution.

Even after the constitution was passed, Kurdish women struggled to get attention for women's rights against the backdrop of the Kurdish struggle for independence. Women said that issues like the status of Kirkuk, Kurdish independence, and federalism always have priority. "Political leaders are busy with issues to do with political balance, negotiations, and trading," said one women's rights activist. "They are not bothered with women's rights. Kurdish leaders forget about women's rights when they discuss Kirkuk." Male leaders were not the only ones who prioritized Kurdish rights above women's rights. One Kurdish woman in parliament told scholars that she was concerned with the plight of women in central and southern Iraq, but Kurdish issues came first. "We are putting our energies and efforts into the Kurdish constitution and into lobbying our local

32 The Kurdish leadership claims Kirkuk should be part of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, while the Iraqi government maintains it should remain part of the Iraqi state.

33 Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What Kind of Liberation, 114.
Kurdish politicians. That is what is important to us," she said. "Yes, we work with our Iraqi sisters from time to time. I feel for them and what they have to go through. Fortunately, women in Kurdistan have managed to achieve a lot since ‘91."34

Despite the divisions between Kurdish and Iraqi women, women's rights activists did not allow differences to lead to two separate liberal feminist movements. Though many organization in Iraqi Kurdistan only accepted Kurdish women, ASUDA became the first Iraqi women's organization to establish a shelter that accepted both Arab and Iraqi women.35 ASUDA also organized a training program to teach women from various Iraqi organizations how to improve their organizations' effectiveness.36 Several organizations based in central Iraq also maintain offices in Iraqi Kurdistan, including Iraqi al-Amal Association and the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI). These organizations also publish research on Kurdish women's rights, such as the figures on honor killings and domestic violence in Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Iraqi feminists struggle for unity and independence from government**

Because women have struggled to gain true political power within the Iraqi parliament, cabinet, and political parties, activists within the liberal feminist movement have been unified in their desire to be independent from both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish government. Rather than let the disputes among various political parties


interfere with their work, women's groups have organized across regional and party lines, and attempted to create a space for independent advocacy for women.

To separate women's issue for politics, liberal feminist activists have called for giving the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs more power and for establishing independent, apolitical government organizations to advocate for women's rights. They have called for making the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs into a regular ministry, rather than a ministry of state, hoping that this would bring greater resources to the ministry. They have also called for setting up a body that is separate from the political parties to analyze and recommend legislation. The Iraqi al-Amal Association has advocated for establishing an organization like Iraq's election commission or the United State's Congressional Budget Office that would be a government organization, yet not beholden to any of the political parties.37

The efforts of Iraqi feminists have achieved some success, although many of their demands remain unmet. The Iraqi government approved a quota system on December 5, 2011 mandating that 50 percent of new hires at the Ministries of Health and Education be women, and 30 percent of the new hires at every other ministry be women. This would allow women to gain government positions and develop real political experience. While the idea sounds good on paper, women rights activists said "stumbling blocks" will prevent it from being implemented. "Maybe with the passage of time and with the removal of these stumbling blocks, the percentage might be achieved. But at present, there are difficulties. We need more awareness, more preparation and training for

women, to enable them to undertake their responsibilities in their jobs,” said one women's rights activist.38

When dealing with Iraqi actors, the liberal feminist movement has pushed for greater political power and independence, and a more secular legal code; however, these efforts have failed to revise the current constitution or give women power independently of the male-dominated political parties. Nonetheless, these efforts demonstrate that Iraqi women can maintain a unified movement despite ethnic disputes and various political affiliations. Tilly's definition of a social movement does not exclude the possibility of disagreement among organizations within the movement. The Iraqi feminist movement includes women with various identities and personal priorities, but they still managed to come together to push for greater independence for women's organizations and more power for women in government.

CHAPTER 3
ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN IRAQ

Introduction

On March 12, 2000, hundreds of thousands of men and women took to the streets in Casablanca and Rabat. In Rabat, the demonstrators were marching in support of proposed government reforms to end discrimination against women. A network of liberal feminist groups organized the demonstrations, as well as meetings, conferences, and other events to raise awareness about women's rights. Yet, in nearby Casablanca, demonstrators took to the streets to oppose these reforms, which they saw as threatening Islamic values. This protest was noteworthy because, in addition to the clerics and pious men one would expect at such a demonstration, it also included thousands of women. Zakia Salime, a scholar who studied women's movements in Morocco, described the protests:

It was composed of overwhelming numbers of veiled women, most wearing the Moroccan djellaba—a long, loose women's dress—in what seemed to be a statement of national identity. Qur'an in one hand, women alternated religious citations from the Qur'an and Hadith with political slogans: "Men and women are equal before God" and "No to the international convention on women's rights." \(^1\)

These protests were not organized by Islamist political parties, but by Muslim women's groups in Morocco.

The protests in Morocco are an example of an emerging feminist movement in the Middle East known as Islamic Feminism. Similar movements have emerged in Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Nigeria, and Yemen. The Islamic feminist movement in Iraq does not

\(^1\) Zakia Salime, Between Feminism and Islam, xiii.
appear to be as organized as its counter-parts in countries like Morocco and Egypt. Nonetheless, it is emerging as a social movement that is distinct from both liberal feminism and the Islamist political parties. While Islamic feminists seek to promote women's rights like their counterparts in liberal feminist movements, they have different beliefs and frames underpinning their arguments for women's rights. They also remain distinct from Islamist political parties because they reject the patriarchal interpretations of Islam and reinterpret the Sharia to empower women.

**Islamic feminists create a new women's rights discourse**

Islamic feminists distinguish themselves from liberal feminists by grounding their arguments for women's rights in Islam, rather than in international legal norms or other philosophical arguments. Margot Badran, who has studied feminism in Egypt and other Muslim-majority countries, describes Islamic feminists as scholars and religious practitioners who reinterpret religious texts to promote the spiritual equality of women. According to Badran, "Islamic feminism argues that the Qur'an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between men and women (and other categories of people) has been subverted by patriarchal ideas and practices."\(^2\)

Islamic feminists argue that some scholars have misinterpreted Islam and used it to justify pre-existing patriarchal norms. To do this, they examine the validity of the hadiths used to justify discriminatory practices and suggest alternative readings of the Qur'an. According to Islamic feminists, the Qur'an and the Hadith actually promote gender

\(^2\) Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 247.
equality. However, these texts were interpreted in light of patriarchal customs and traditions, resulting in an incorrect version of Islamic law that oppressed women.

Badran also distinguishes between liberal feminists and Islamic feminists by arguing that liberal feminism is more action-oriented. Badran sees liberal feminism as a social movement that approaches society and the government with specific demands and takes action to persuade those in power to meet these demands. In contrast, Badran describes Islamic feminism as a "new discourse or interpretation of Islam."\(^3\) While I agree that Islamic feminism is a new discourse and interpretation, that does not necessarily prevent it from being an action-oriented social movement. Islamic feminists in Morocco, for example, took action and made claims just as liberal feminists did. Instead, Islamic feminism ought to be seen as its own social movement based on a reinterpretation of Islamic texts.

Like members of the liberal feminist movement, Islamic feminists make claims and engage in WUNC displays to draw attention to these claims. However, Islamic feminism uses different frames and belief systems to define women’s rights and justify arguments in favor of promoting those rights. Islamic feminists argue that the Qur'an gives women the right and responsibility to spread Islam, enabling them to have a role in the public sphere and giving them fundamental equality before God. They argue that different hadiths demonstrate that Mohammed consulted women on political matters, and therefore a society in keeping with Islamic tradition would allow a space for women in government. Zakia Salime argues that Islamic feminists created a new kind of feminist

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\(^3\) Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 3.
movement by drawing on Islamic texts to justify demands for greater rights for women. "Islamist women's writings reversed liberal feminists claims that a woman's emancipation is contingent upon her rupture with religious tradition."\(^4\) This made Islamic feminism both a religious and feminist project, and created a new kind of feminism that made it possible for women to be both feminists and pious Muslims.

**Islamic feminism emerges in Iraq**

While there does not appear to be an Islamic feminist movement as organized and internationally-known as the Moroccan Islamic feminist movement, Iraq is developing its own Islamic feminist movement. Islamic feminists were perhaps most visible during the controversy surrounding Iraq's constitution. As liberal feminists took to the streets to protest the personal status law, Islamic feminists joined more conservative Islamist women to defend the changes to the personal status law.\(^5\) They staged counter protests alongside the protests staged by the liberal feminists. Hanaa Edwar, secretary general of the Iraqi al-Amal Association, and other liberal feminist activists said groups of women would stage protests to counter their own and to support changes to the personal status law. Edwar said that during one protest "a small group of women appeared in the street holding banners and slogans against 'absolute' equality of women. They shouted slogans for Islam and the Qur'an. One of them stated clearly in an interview that they demand for the Qur'an to be adopted as a constitution and for establishing an Islamic government."\(^6\)

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\(^4\) Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*, 51-52.

\(^5\) It would be incorrect to group Islamist women and Islamic feminists together as one movement for reasons I will explain later in the chapter.

\(^6\) Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, 139.
Like liberal feminists, Islamic feminists have organized into various groups and reached out to the media to make their demands heard. They have formed the Muslim Women's Federation to organize for the promotion of women's rights based in Islam. When interviewed by media outlets, members of the federation advocated for a constitution based on Islamic law. "Islam is the first system to have called for the freedom of women and to have treated women with respect," said Muslim Women's Federation member Mahdiya Abd al-Lami. "Islam highlights the importance of women."\(^7\)

Al-Lami's quote demonstrates the fundamental difference between the liberal feminist movement and the Islamic feminist movement: the Islamic feminists base their definition and justification for women's rights in a reinterpretation of Islam, whereas liberal feminists define and justify women's rights based on international laws and standards. As a result, members of the two movements often disagree on what women's rights entail. Many liberal feminists want to see women able to initiate divorce with as little effort and for the same reasons as men.\(^8\) However, many Islamic feminists would rather divorce laws be in keeping with Islamic texts, even if it means women are given slightly different rights than men. Mahdiyah Abd al-Lami said she was more concerned with justice for women than with absolute equality between men and women. "We want


\(^8\) Amira Mashhour, "Islamic Law and Gender Equality: Could There Be Room for Common Ground?: A Study of Divorce and Polygamy in Sharia Law and Contemporary Legislation in Tunisia and Egypt," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27 no. 2 (2005): 575. There are various interpretations of Sharia law with regard to divorce. For example, the four schools of Muslim law—the Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafii—disagree on when a wife can seek divorce from her husband. The Hanafi school asserts that she can do so only if he is unable to consummate the marriage or is "missing", but, according to the Maliki school, a wife can seek divorce for a number of reasons including maltreatment or harm. For more information, see
justice, not equality," she said. "If we demand absolute equality between men and women, that would mean depriving women of certain rights. For example, the woman is the one who takes maternity leave, not the man. If women were equal in the law, they would be deprived of that legitimate right." Many Islamic feminists do not believe that men and women need to be treated the same under the law, rather they believe that women are entitled to the rights given to them by correct interpretations of Islamic law.

Liberal feminists, on the other hand, look to international law and norms to define women's rights and persuade society to adopt these rights. For example, members of Iraq's liberal feminist movement were particularly concerned that the constitution did not explicitly recognize the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The Iraqi al-Amal Association ran a campaign in 2006 to raise awareness about the treaty and push for a constitutional commitment to uphold the treaty. The treaty defines a violation of women's rights as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition…of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." Eliminating "any distinction" between men and women is different from the Islamic feminist belief that women are distinct from men, but still spiritually equal and entitled to certain rights. Islamic

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9 Asma al-Sarraj, "Islamist Women speak out on Constitution."


feminists believe in the "supremacy of Sharia over the international conventions of women's rights."\(^{12}\) However, Hanaa Edwar and other liberal feminists argued that Iraq previously signed international treaties into law and therefore they are a legitimate part of Iraqi legislation.\(^{13}\)

Islamic feminists also reframed liberal feminists' interpretation of women's rights. Like the Islamic feminists in Morocco, Iraqi Islamic feminists framed the demands and arguments made by liberal feminists as "Western" and contrary to Islam. Secular feminists framed their demands and arguments as "value-neutral"\(^{14}\) and necessary for a unified Iraq. Islamic feminists and supporters of the constitutional changes to Iraq's more secular personal status law said the constitution maintained Iraqi and Islamic values. "It gives women all rights and freedoms as long as they don't contradict our values," said Mariam al-Raayyes, who was on the committee that drafted the constitution. "Concerning marriage, inheritance and divorce, this is civil status law; that should not contradict our religious values."\(^{15}\) Islamic feminists do not see the equality that international conventions call for as value-neutral. Instead, they see this definition of women's rights as in conflict with the values of Islam.

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\(^{12}\) Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*, 32.

\(^{13}\) Hanaa Edwar, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 9, 2012.

\(^{14}\) I borrowed the phrase "value-neutral" from Zakia Salime's discussion of the different ways secular and Islamic feminists view international women's rights conventions.

Islamic feminists' interpretation of international norms on women's rights frames women's issues differently than the interpretation used by members of the liberal feminist movement in Iraq. Recent scholarship in social movement theory asserts that participants in social movements are not just "carriers" of ideas and meanings, but actively produce these ideas and assign interpretations to various events. Social movement theory calls this process of assigning meaning and interpreting events as framing. When it is done in the context of a social movement, it is called collective action framing because it does not just make sense of events, but does so in a way "intended to mobilize political adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists."\(^{16}\) More recent scholarship has examined the cultural frames various social movements use, particularly in Muslim-majority societies. In studying the Palestinian movement Hamas, Glenn Robinson asserts that "every society has a variety of stories, symbols, and histories that make up something of a collective cultural toolbox. Different groups privilege different sets of tools, and the various interpretations and uses of cultural tools often directly contradict one another."\(^{17}\)

Iraq's Islamic and liberal feminist movements can be distinguished as separate social movements in part because of the different frames they use to mobilize participants in the movement and make their movements appeal to the public. Islamic feminists look at issues of women's rights through the frame of Islam. By looking to the Qur'an and


reinterpreting the Sharia, they draw on Iraqi society's Islamic history. In contrast, liberal feminists often look at more secular ideologies like international law and nationalism. When protesting the changes to the personal status law, Hanaa Edwar argued that allowing various clerics to interpret the Sharia would "create divisions within the whole society and break down equality."\textsuperscript{18} Edwar is framing the issue as one of equality and national unity, which draws on different aspects of Iraq's cultural history than an appeal to Islam.

\textit{Islamic and liberal feminists engage in Iraq}

While they remaining two different movements, secular and Islamist feminist movements still interacted with one another and were not always in opposition. The categories of Islamic feminist and secular feminist are not meant to be completely rigid categories. Zakia Salime has criticized much of the literature on Islamic feminism for portraying it as solely in opposition to liberal feminism, rather than "as part of a process of exchange" between women's groups.\textsuperscript{19} Drawing inspiration from Salime's study of women's groups in Morocco, I will demonstrate how the Islamic feminist and liberal feminist movements in Iraq converged and built off one another's successes.

Islamic feminists in Iraq have been quick to point out that they are in agreement with liberal feminists on many issues. Iraqi Islamic feminist Mahdiya Abd al-Lami said Islamic feminists "agree with them [liberal feminists] as far as the will to improve the situation of Iraqi women who were oppressed for many years. So, I do agree with them in

\textsuperscript{18} Hanaa Edwar, interview by author, Washington, DC, February 9, 2012.

\textsuperscript{19} Zakia Salime, \textit{Between Feminism and Islam}, xxiv.
providing women with human rights. That those rights are not in conflict with Islamic law is our only concern." Likewise, liberal feminists said they could find areas of convergence between their beliefs and the beliefs of Islamic feminists. A coordinator with the Iraqi Women's Network described efforts to reach out to the Islamic feminists who engaged in counter-demonstrations while liberal feminists protested the constitution.

We asked them to come to our tent to discuss the issue. Actually, from the beginning we invited women from Islamic backgrounds. Not the fanatical figures, of course. When we were dealing with women from the grassroots this was never an issue. But we do sometimes have problems with women from the Islamist political parties. On this occasion, they came to our tent and we realized our differences are actually not so big. We explained to them that the personal status code we are supporting is not against Islamic law.

Her quote mentions the difference between liberal feminists and the women of Islamist political parties--whose differences with Islamic feminists I will discuss later in this chapter--and also demonstrates that many Islamic feminists could find common ground with liberal feminists.

Dialogue between liberal and Islamic feminists enabled liberal feminists to better engage with women of the grassroots. Liberal feminists in Morocco had a similar learning experience after Islamic feminists held a counter-demonstration to feminists' demands. A feminist activist in Morocco said that prior to the Islamic feminists' march, liberal feminists "completely ignored the importance of incorporating religion into their

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20 Asma al-Sarraj, "Islamist Women speak out on Constitution."

21 Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What Kind of Liberation, 139-140.
discourse." After observing the success of Islamic feminists, many liberal feminist organizations in Morocco started using the Sharia to advocate for women's rights and demonstrate that women's rights and Islam were not necessarily in opposition. Hanaa Edwar said women in Iraq also began incorporating feminist interpretations of Islam into the Iraqi al-Amal Association's advocacy for women's rights. As women's rights activists held training sessions for judges, government employees, and other activists, Edwar said they used the Qur'an and hadiths to demonstrate that women's rights were compatible with Islamic law. "We integrated gender issues with tribal and religious values to train judges, politicians, and teachers," she said. "Some of our trainers had a religious background and they were able to train people in a way that was compatible with their special environment and their traditions." 

**Islamic feminists and women of Islamist political parties**

Margot Badran drew attention to the importance of distinguishing between Islamic feminists and Islamist women who "promote political Islam and its patriarchal versions of the religion." Advocating for Islamic law is not the same as advocating for an interpretation of Islamic law that promotes women's rights. This is especially true in Iraq, where Islamist political parties fill parliamentary and government seats with women, while simultaneously pushing for laws that limit women's rights. As discussed in the previous chapter, the women in Iraq's government are often beholden to the male

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22 Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam*, 85.


leadership of their political parties and do not work as Islamic feminists by promoting a progressive interpretation of Islamic law that upholds the rights of women.

Female Iraqi politician Safia al-Suhail said women are not in positions of real power and independence. "We are seeing women in soft ministries. Even those women who are chosen by certain political parties can't give their positions independently, they have to bow to a leader. We want to have a woman who is a leader herself," al-Suhail said. Women politicians like Jenan al-Ubaedey said they entered politics to promote the establishment of Islamic law. Al-Ubaedey said she supported polygamy and would leave her job if her husband asked because "I didn’t make the law, God did, so it can’t be changed." Her interpretation of this law differs dramatically from the interpretation of many Islamic feminists, particularly because Islamists like al-Ubaedey endorse domestic violence, provided a husband does not leave a mark on his wife. Al-Ubaedey supports this interpretation of Islamic law because asking a husband not to use force against his wife is "asking the impossible." These kinds of positions make it clear that promoting a patriarchal interpretation of Islamic law is vastly different than reinterpretting Islamic law in a way that provides women with greater rights.

Iraqi Islamic feminists distinguished between their own positions and those of the Islamist women in government. An interview with activist and scholar Salama Sumaysim provides several examples of how Islamic feminists' interpretations of Islamic law set


their movement apart from the activities of women in Islamist political parties. Indeed, Sumaysim said she is "rejected by Islamists themselves" because she sees equality "through the prism of the Koran that declares that God does not distinguish among people, except according to the single measure of piety and good deeds." Sumaysim's position of equality of men and women before God gives her common ground with liberal feminists and demonstrates the differences between Islamic feminists and Islamist women who interpret Islamic law in a way that oppresses women. Unlike Islamist politician Jenan al-Ubaedey, Sumaysim said that discrimination between men and women and the guardianship of men over women is not Islamic law, but is instead an example of "how men have misused the text of the Koran."

However, it is important to acknowledge that not all women in parliament are either beholden to Islamist male leaders or outspoken liberal feminists. Examining the activities of more conservative Muslim women in parliament reveals that categories like Islamist woman or Islamic feminist are imperfect labels of a complicated phenomenon. Rather than seeing these categories as fixed, we should recognize that not all women activists fall neatly within one movement or the other. For example, Salama al-Khafaji voted in favor of applying Islamic law to personal status issues. However, she can hardly be seen as a puppet of Islamist men. Her husband divorced her because she continued to pursue politics despite his objections, and her interpretation of Islamic law is different from more conservative ones. She said she supports Islamic law because, when properly interpreted, it provides "better protection to women in divorce and custody proceedings.

Asma al-Sarraj, "Islamist Women speak out on Constitution."
than does secular law." Women like Salama al-Khafaji can be labeled as both Islamist politicians and Islamic feminists. They may be members of parliament who often vote with conservative Islamist parties, but they are hardly without their own agency. While there may be truth to generalities about the women serving in Iraq's parliament, it is important to recognize the women who defy these generalities.

Though most of this paper and other scholarship focuses on women Islamic feminists, Iraqi men are also adopting the views of Islamic feminism. One example is Alaa Makki, who heads the Iraqi parliament's education committee. Though he describes himself as an Islamist and not a liberal, Makki has criticized conservative Islamist politicians for failing to include women in powerful leadership positions. He told the Associated Press that the Prophet Mohammed "was taking advice and consulting with women around him, and the consultation was real consultation. I mean, he built decisions on that consultation." Like other Islamic feminists, Makki is offering a reinterpretation of Islamic law that draws on the example of the Prophet Mohammed to demonstrate that women should have real power in government.

Though less has been written on Makki and other Iraqi Islamic feminists than on their counterparts in countries like Morocco and Egypt, a strong Islamic feminist movement is emerging in Iraq. Iraqi Islamic feminists are drawing on passages of the Qur'an and hadiths to argue that conservatives have misinterpreted Islamic law and created a system that does not stay true to the egalitarian message of the Qur'an. Though

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this egalitarian approach towards women's rights leaves some room for cooperation with liberal feminists, the Iraqi Islamic feminist movement remains a distinct movement. Unlike liberal feminists, Islamic feminists do not define women's rights based on international norms, nor do they argue that international law or human rights principles require certain rights for women. Instead, of debating the merit of religious principles versus international human rights norms, Islamic feminists avoid this debate by reframing the application of women's rights as a religious issue.
Rising violence limits progress on women's rights

While women's movements in Iraq have made some gains, both the influence of Islamist feminists and secular feminists will likely be limited by an increasingly authoritarian state and greater instability and violence. After American troops left the country, Iraq witnessed a sharp increase in terrorist attacks. Since the last troops left on December 18, 2011, assassinations and explosions have killed at least 327 Iraqis. The nonprofit organization Iraqi Body Count, says this represents a 35 percent increase from last year's monthly averages. The violence started quickly after U.S. troops left with a series of 15 bombs in Baghdad on December 22nd. The Islamic State of Iraqi took credit for the attacks, claiming they were retaliation for the Shiite-controlled government imprisoning Sunnis. Scholars and government officials said the violence was not just about settling sectarian scores, but also about "sending messages that security is not under control."\(^1\)

The rising violence is likely to limit the work Iraqi feminists can do, especially since past violence limited the ability of women's groups to organize. When violence was at its height, Iraqi women's activists said they were afraid to leave their homes, let alone participate in social movement activities. One Iraqi feminist said women with a public profile were the primary target of militias, "but they even kill women who are not in any way politically active and do not work in an NGO. Those of us who do live in fear.

\(^1\) Dan Morse, "Iraq violence up sharply since U.S. exit," Washington Post, January 17, 2012.
Several of my colleagues have already been shot, and I received several death threats.\textsuperscript{2} Her fears were not just a matter of perception. The president of the Woman's Freedom Organization, Senar Muhammad, was assassinated on May 17, 2007, and her successor, Haifaa Nour, said she received numerous death threats. Nour told the media that her organization was being targeted and "our employees are scared to leave their homes after threatening notes were left on their doors. My husband was killed a year ago when I started working as an activist."\textsuperscript{3} When violence was high in Iraq in the past, women said it impacted their ability to organize. Now that security is deteriorating again, Iraqi women's activists will once again be limited by the threat of violence.

**Iraqi government responds to the Arab Spring with authoritarianism**

On February 14, 2011 hundreds of Iraqis decided to join the Arab Spring with a protest in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. Since the protest was on Valentine's Day, the demonstrators wore red and carried roses. They were protesting the high rate of unemployment and the lack of government services like electricity. "It was peaceful from our side, but not from the government side," said Noof Assi, one of the protestors and a member of the Iraqi al-Amal Association. "There was lots of hitting and people were arrested.\textsuperscript{4} When the protests continued, the government conducted a brutal crackdown. On February 25, 2011, thousands Iraqis took to the streets in protests called "The Day of Rage." The government responded by sponsoring mobs to attack the protestors and

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allowing security forces to beat and arrest dozens more.\(^5\) While the number of demonstrators dwindled, a few dozen Iraqis continued to protest each Friday for months. Noof Assi said she continued to blog about the protests and attempted to use social media to spread the word about Iraqis' demands. "But it is hard work being in the streets always," she said. "With people getting arrested and beaten, it's difficult to stay motivated."\(^6\) Yanar Mohammed, a liberal feminist and president of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI), said women from her organization are still participating in the Arab Spring, but they are doing so with caution. "Once we see security forces, we leave the square," Mohammed said. "We are not willing to be tortured again and again."\(^7\)

The government's response to the protests of the Arab Spring demonstrates its refusal to tolerate challenges to its authority, but the protests have also opened up the possibility of new partners and greater recognition for Iraqi feminists. Liberal Iraqi feminists are finding allies in the demonstrators of Iraq's Arab Spring. OWFI has reached out to all members of Iraqi society by organizing protests about issues like electricity and jobs, rather than just about women's rights. The broader focus has given women activists the opportunity to take leadership positions within a broader protest movement. Yanar Mohammed said the protests have empowered members of her organization:

Two of our OWFI team were and still are residents in our shelters, and apparently disempowered by the tribal and religious scene. Yet both of them were leaders in

\(^5\) Salah Nasrawi, "Why did Iraq miss the Arab Spring," \textit{Al-Ahram}, December 31, 2011.


\(^7\) Rebecca Burns, "Fighting for Gender Equality in Iraq," \textit{In These Times} 36, no. 2, (2012): 35.
Iraq’s Tahrir square, and organizers of Facebook groups of young women and men. For some young women the demonstrations provided a major opportunity, allowing them to go from being simply a trafficking victim to being a leader of thousands of protesters.\textsuperscript{8}

The Arab Spring protests prompted Iraqi women's rights activists to cooperate with a broader segment of society and gain valuable organizing experience in the process.

Liberal feminists also framed the Arab Spring protests as part of a larger movement to ensure greater freedom and equality for all citizens, including women. Hanaa Edwar, secretary general of the Iraqi al-Amal Association, says she sees the young women activists of the Arab Spring as one of the few sources of inspiration when the Iraqi government is steadily cracking down on both women's rights and human rights generally. "We are in a constant struggle for our survival," she said. "But I see hope in the next generation."\textsuperscript{9} Like Edwar, Yanar Mohammed said the Arab Spring demonstrated that young Iraqis were effectively mobilizing to pursue greater human rights and equality for all citizens, including women. According to Mohammed, these protests revealed the "heinous and misogynist character of the police institutions of the Arab states, where despotism and misogyny walk hand in hand to maintain the status quo."\textsuperscript{10} By tying the issue of women’s rights so clearly to the human rights of the entire society, rather than framing the issue as one of women versus men, Mohammed demonstrated that liberal feminists are not going to isolate themselves from other movements. "Women’s freedoms

\textsuperscript{8} Musab Younis, "Interview: Yanar Mohammed: This government of ethnic and sectarian divisions does not represent Iraqis in any way," \textit{Ceasefire}, January 11, 2012.

\textsuperscript{9} Hanaa Edwar, interview with author, Washington DC, February 9, 2012.

can be achieved with the progress of the society towards human and civil rights, and this process has just begun in the Middle East," she said. "Dictatorship and despotism can never nurture a freedom-loving society. We should think along the lines of breaking the tip of the iceberg, which is to oust the head of the system first, then strengthen our tools of organising and struggle, and keep on stressing an egalitarian and freedom-loving social agenda."\(^{11}\)

By demonstrating for greater human rights and equality for all of society, Mohammed and other liberal feminists are ensuring they can form coalitions with other social movement organizations. They are also giving the feminist movement greater appeal by tying it to the Arab Spring. Because the Arab Spring is largely perceived as an indigenous movement and not an international project, liberal feminists can now link their demands to a movement that cannot be credibly portrayed as part of an imperialist project. This may make the liberal feminist movement less vulnerable to the criticism that its demands run counter to traditional Iraqi culture and are part of an imperial project designed to weaken Muslim and Arab societies.

It is unclear whether or not the protests of the Arab Spring were as beneficial for the Iraqi Islamic feminist movement as they were for the liberal feminist movement. The protests seemed to have a decidedly secular tone and there is no evidence that Islamic feminists used the protests to push for reinterpreting the Qur'an to provide women rights. Islamic feminists may have participated in the protests, but the protests still seemed to maintain a more secular message. Conservative Islamists that did participate were unable

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
to change the tone of the protests and secular activists said the Arab Spring demonstrated
the weakness of Islamist movements. According to Yanar Mohammed, the protests
demonstrated that conservative religious forces were losing their control on the Iraqi
population. She said:

We witnessed in Tahrir square that nobody identified themselves by religion or
sect. The only ones to step into that practice were the few clerics who came
numerous times and tried to hold the Friday prayers, but they were embarrassed
when they were not followed by many, and did not repeat their visits. The other
big change was that when Ayatollah Sistani issued a statement against the
demonstrations – calling them “suspicious” – that decree was not obeyed by the
75,000 people who participated in the demonstrations in all the Iraqi cities on
February 25.\textsuperscript{12}

Mohammed's description of the protests suggests that Iraqis were driven more by
widespread concerns about jobs and services, than by religious or sectarian identity. This
provides a greater opportunity for secular feminists, whose calls for human rights and
equal opportunities would be more in keeping with the discourse of the Arab Spring
protests. However, this does not suggest that the Arab Spring put the Islamic feminist
movement at a disadvantage. Rather, the Arab Spring allowed liberal feminists to frame
their movement as part of something that resonated with greater Iraqi society, which
Islamic feminists could already do by appealing to the Qur'an and Hadith.

Activists confront increasingly authoritarian state

While Iraqi women are gaining allies and organizing experience, they are still
facing a government that seems unlikely to respond to their demands. The government’s
crackdown on peaceful demonstrators is indicative of the authoritarian direction the al-

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
Maliki government is taking and poses a challenge to feminists' attempts to put women in positions of real power in government. "The United States left behind a weak and corrupt administration, divided by sect and ethnicity," said Hanaa Edwar. "Each leader is looking out for his own privileges." The government has responded violently to the Arab Spring and Iraqi security forces killed dozens of demonstrators when they shot into the crowds. Journalists and other demonstrators echoed claims by women's rights activists that security forces tortured prominent protestors. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki did not apologize for the crackdown on protesters, but instead said Iraqis should turn to the electoral system to express their grievances. He even condemned the protests in other parts of the Arab world, saying that Israel and the Zionists would benefit from the "internal corrosion" the Arab Spring is causing within Arab countries.

Since the United States left, al-Maliki's government has been inciting sectarian tensions and behaving increasingly like a dictatorship. Iraqi government forces arrested and interrogated the security forces that protect key politicians from the Iraqiyah coalition, the largest opposition party. Using information obtained from interrogating these guards, government officials accused Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi of planning terrorist attacks as far back as 2008. Al-Maliki ordered al-Hashimi's arrest, but

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14 Iraq's Arab Spring protests did not receive as much media attention as those in other countries. For information on the protests see Stephanie McCrum, "Iraq 'Day of Rage' protests followed by detentions, beatings," The Washington Post, February 26, 2011, and Salah Nasrawi, "Why did Iraq miss the Arab Spring," Al-Ahram, December 31, 2011, and Jane Arraf, "Iraq's Arab Spring: Protests rise against persistent poverty in oil-rich nation," The Christian Science Monitor, May 24, 2011.

al-Hashimi took refuge in Iraq’s Kurdish region and Kurdish officials are refusing to hand him over to Baghdad’s government. To make matters worse, al-Maliki put Sunni politician Salah al-Mutlaq on extended leave after he accused al-Maliki of being a dictator and called for greater regional autonomy for the Sunni-majority provinces.\textsuperscript{16} Al-Maliki’s behavior indicates that he is looking to consolidate power, even at the expense of inflaming sectarian tensions. This kind of authoritarian government is unlikely to let go of any political power in order to create a more inclusive government that gives women a real voice.

Governments that behave in this authoritarian manner are also less likely to encourage a strong civil society sector that can criticize government policies and push to change them. Members of NGOs and Iraqi civil society organizations have said it is becoming more difficult for them to work on controversial issues. The problems are not limited to women's groups, but impact all civil society organizations and journalists. Although Iraq's NGO law is considered one of the most progressive in the region, it still requires that NGOs register with the government and members must provide civil status identity cards. Activists have reported that the registration process is often time-consuming and cumbersome. They reported being asked for more documents than the NGO law requires they submit. NGO members have also expressed concern about their privacy since they have to hand over extensive documentation.\textsuperscript{17} The long wait for

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official sanction to operate can prevent NGOs from organizing effectively for months or even years. The laws requiring registration documents also may make Iraqis hesitant to join NGOs, as they are aware that the government would have complete information on anyone in an opposition group. This fear is especially real given that journalists and other members of society who express dissent have recently been killed. For example, prominent journalist Hadi al-Mahdi was being monitored by Iraqi security forces after leading protests on Iraq's "Day of Rage." He said security forces had beaten and threatened him. He was still planning a large protest for September 9, 2011, but he was killed on September 8th. The crime scene showed no signs of theft and the murder has still not been solved.18

Activists said the political climate is allowing less space for journalists to express dissent or for NGOs to push for change. Hashim al-Assaf heads Iraq's NGO Coordination Committee, the main umbrella organization for NGOs in the country. During a recent trip to the United States, he said the political climate in Iraq does not accept dissenting opinions. According to al-Assaf, lawsuits by political figures against journalists increased 50 percent between 2010 and 2011. "We have to do more to protect the space of civil society," he said. "That space is shrinking quickly."19 Al-Maliki's cabinet moved to restrict dissent further by approving the Law on the Freedom of Expression of Opinion,


Assembly, and Peaceful Demonstration. The law, which awaits parliamentary approval, authorizes officials to restrict freedom of assembly to protect "the public interest" and "general order or public morals." Ideas like "public interest" and "public morals" are open to various interpretations and could easily be interpreted in a way that prevents activists from organizing any anti-government protests. In this kind of environment it is difficult to imagine how Iraq's feminist movements can organize sustained campaigns to press for their demands.

The future of Islamic feminism in Iraq

Scholars have predicted that Islamic feminism will become the dominant form of feminism in Muslim-majority countries. While this may prove true in other countries, Iraq's unique history and religious and ethnic composition makes that less likely. Margot Badran argued that Islamic feminism would become the "new radical feminism in Muslim societies." She draws this conclusion based on five arguments: Islam is becoming the most important "cultural and political paradigm", growing literacy and education will encourage feminist breakthroughs, Islamic feminism is the "only language" that can reach a broad Muslim audience, globalization is prompting diaspora women to reach for an Islamic feminism, and finally, globalization is allowing Muslim women across the globe to connect with one another and produce a "denationalized" feminism. Her arguments may hold true for many Muslim-majority countries, but I do not believe her arguments

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21 Margot Badran, Feminism in Islam, 219.
consider the recent conflicts in Iraq's history, its sectarian divisions, or the impact of the Arab Spring.

Margot Badran's first argument, that Islam is the most important "cultural and political paradigm" was more convincing before the Arab Spring. I would not argue that the Arab Spring made Islamism irrelevant, far from it. Islamist parties won the Egyptian elections, Al-Nahda won more than 40 percent of the seats in Tunisia, and parties that seek to give Islamic principles a greater role in government remain popular throughout the Middle East. Islamist movement are still important and influential in Muslim-majority countries, but the Arab Spring demonstrated that calls for reform based on Islam are not the only, or even the most powerful, calls for reform in the region. As Egyptian professor Ashraf El Sherif argued, "middle-class youth" with "secular sensibilities" led the Arab Spring because they wanted "good governance, democracy, and human rights." Like their counterparts in other countries, Iraq's protestors were not calling for Islamic law, they were calling for jobs, services, the protection of human rights, and an end to corruption. These demands are neither Islamic nor secular. They could easily be framed as Islamic values, but the majority of protestors did not choose to frame them in this manner. This indicates that social movements, whether feminist or otherwise, do not have to frame their demands as part of a return to Islamic values in order to make them appeal powerfully to audiences in Muslim-majority countries.

Badran also argued that growing rates of education and literacy in the Middle East would inspire more women to read and re-interpret the Qur'an, and allow more women to

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access Islamic feminist literature. While this is likely true of most Muslim-majority
countries, years of war have made the situation different in Iraq. The effects of wars and
devastating sanctions have prevented many women from receiving any education, let
alone the kind that would enable them to re-interpret the Qur'an. Though Iraq once
boasted the lowest illiteracy rates in the region, those rates have been increasing recently.
At least 20 percent of the general population, and 24 percent of women, were illiterate as
of 2010. The education system has also suffered major setbacks. Schools have been
damaged and destroyed, scholars have fled the country, and fear has kept students at
home. In 2006, when sectarian violence was at its height, many women felt that
attending school was simply too dangerous. One female NGO activist said at the time
that security prevented women from "leaving the home to get educated or go to work.
Women are targeted through abductions, and there are cases of women being sold into
sex-trafficking. Women are threatened in universities for not wearing the headscarf."  
While many Muslim women were gaining greater educational opportunities, the women
in Iraq were dealing with violence that prevented them from going to school at all.
Because of this trend, Iraqi women are an exception to Badran's argument that greater
educational opportunities are allowing more women to reinterpret the Qur'an and access
feminist literature.

23 NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq, "Illiteracy Rate in Iraq Climbs among Highest in the
26, 2012).

24 Nadje al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, What Kind of Liberation, 77.
Badran also argued that "only the language of Islamic feminism can potentially reach women of all classes and across urban-rural divides."\(^{25}\) However, Islam has not always worked as a unifying force in Iraq. The divide between Sunnis and Shiites means that Islam has not always been a unifying factor in the way that has for many other Muslim-majority nations. Because Islamic feminism is based on a reinterpretation of Islamic law that grants greater rights to women, the differences between Sunni and Shia Islam make it difficult for women of the two sects to unite under one version of Islamic feminism. While reinterpreting the Qur'an is an area where Shia and Sunni Islamic feminists could cooperate, they would have more difficulty working with the Sunna. Shia jurists also include the teachings of the imams as part of the Sunna, so Shia and Sunni Islamic feminists would be working with a different collection of literature when determining the rights Islam gives women.

While scholars have pointed out the differences between Sunni and Shia schools of law are not so dramatic, they do differ in areas that are critical for women. Some Shia jurists allow temporary marriage called mut'a, which allows a man to marry a women for a prearranged period of time, something not allowed in Sunni schools of law. Shia schools of jurisprudence also have different rules about divorce and inheritance.\(^{26}\) While both Sunni and Shia Islamic feminists could agree on the Qur'an's message of justice and equality for men and women, they may disagree on what additional sources to use for reinterpreting Islamic law.


Another factor that may prevent Islam from being a source of unification for women across Iraq is the historical conflict between Sunnis and Shiites that the United States exacerbated during the invasion. The conflict between the religious sects in Iraq predates the United States' invasion. Even in 1927, when Iraq was ruled as part of the British mandate, protests erupted because a Sunni government employee published a book that was critical of Shia Islam. Later that year, an army officer shot and killed Shias in a Muharram procession, and was acquitted. These problems were far from over when Iraq became independent or when the Ba'ath party came to power. The socialist rhetoric and policies of the Ba'ath regime alienated powerful members of the Shia community and limited the legal authority of the Shia clergy. After the Iranian Revolution, tensions increased because the new Iranian government stressed its Shia identity and encouraged the overthrow of secular leaders and the installation of Islamic regimes. While Shiites made up the bulk of the Iraqi army, even during the war against Iran, Sunnis continued to maintain most leadership positions.

When Saddam Hussein took power, the regime was especially brutal in cracking down on any organizations that stressed a uniquely Shia identity or called for Islamic rule as opposed to the existing secular rule. Even after the war between Iraq and Iran ended in 1988, tensions remained between the Sunni leaders in power and many Shia communities. After Iraq invaded and subsequently lost control of Kuwait in 1991, Shiites


28 Ibid., 195-96 and 237-38.
in cities like Basra, Najaf, and Karbala, rebelled against Saddam's rule. The rebellion was brutally crushed and around 50,000 refugees fled the country. The Iraqi army executed and arrested thousands of people who were suspected of participating in the rebellions and continued to deny government services to those communities.  

While Iraq has a long history of tension between Shia communities and Sunni leaders, the aftermath of the US invasion changed the situation by turning ordinary Shia and Sunni citizens against one another. Rather than violence perpetrated by the regime on Shia communities, both Shia and Sunni militias were now attacking civilians and executing Iraqis based on their sectarian identity. Sunnis were forced to move out of Shia neighborhoods and vice versa. Given this history of tension and the recent violence between Sunnis and Shiites, Islam may not be as powerful a unifying factor as Badran predicted.

While an Islamic feminist movement is emerging in Iraq, Badran's statement that Islamic feminism will be the new radical feminism of Muslim societies may not apply to Iraqi society. The country has a history of tensions between Muslim sects and it has become more, not less, difficult for Iraqi women to obtain the education necessary to reinterpret the Qur'an and Sunna. The Arab Spring has also proved that Islam is not the only cultural frame that will resonate in Muslim-majority countries. This is not to suggest that Iraq's secular feminist movement will necessary flourish. Iraq's political and security climate will make it difficult to for any group to voice opposition to government policies. Even if the government favored instituting greater rights for women, the lack of security

\[29\text{ Ibid., 246 and 264.}\]
would still leave feminist activists vulnerable to attacks by groups that oppose their goals.

In this climate, it is difficult to be optimistic about the short-term prospects of feminist movements in Iraq. However, Iraqi women have demonstrated resilience and the ability to organize under even the most difficult conditions, making it difficult to imagine that feminists demands can be ignored in the longer term.


Neshat, Saeid N. "A Look into the Women's Movement in Iraq." Farzaneh 6, no. 11 (Spring 2003): 54-65.


