3 Experiencing the Invasion and Occupation and the Women of the New Regime

Introduction: Reaching Medinat al-Sadr

At the entrance to the Medinat al-Sadr checkpoint (Figure 3.1), one of Baghdad's main Shi'a neighborhoods, 'Amu Abu Manal insisted on being very careful. Medinat al-Sadr is well known for both its popular reputation and as one of the first targets of sectarian violence against the Shi'a population because it has become since the occupation the rear base of the "Mahdi army." It is an area where at the time of my fieldwork car bombs exploded on a weekly basis, but despite this, it is still very lively and busy. 'Amu Abu Manal's worries also show how Baghdad's divisions are no longer based solely on the sectarian Sunni–Shi'a divide; violent clashes also occur between political groups and militias of the same sect. In addition, such conflicts also have class dimensions.

Medinat al-Sadr is one of the most populous Shi'a neighborhoods of Baghdad. It was built in the 1960s by 'Abd al-Karim Qasim's revolutionary regime to house the population recently settled in the slums of the city. This population had come from the southern region and was originally rural, Shi'a, and tribal. Originally named Medinat al-Thawra (the Revolution's City), the neighborhood was renamed Medinat Saddam ("Saddam's City") under Saddam and, after the fall of the regime in 2003, was renamed again. Its current name, Medinat al-Sadr ("Sadr's City"), commemorates the Shi'a religious figure executed by the Ba'th regime. Medinat al-Sadr is an impoverished suburb carrying all the associated negative prejudices, even from the point of view of other Shi'as from upper and upper middle-class areas of Baghdad like al-Mansur or al-Kazimiyya. A Baghdadi from another area would not feel safe in Medinat al-Sadr; it is considered both a popular neighborhood where tribalism dominates and the site of internal conflicts between Shi'a political groups.

Due to sectarian and political violence, life in postinvasion Baghdad is very unpredictable; Baghdadis live in a constant state of tension and worry. As a result, when living in Baghdad for my fieldwork, I spent more time on the phone than any other time in my life. I had to contact

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Figure 3.1 Al-Shuhada' Square in Baghdad with a missing statue of Saddam Hussein (March 2010).

the people I wanted to meet, call them before leaving home, and then call them after passing their neighborhood's checkpoint. Since many women activists have been the targets of violence, assassinations, and explosions, many organizations do not publicize the location of their offices or hang a sign outside their door. An activist from a well-known women's organization told me that she debates with herself every morning as to whether to hang a sign above the organization's new office. She finally decided against it after receiving death threats during the sectarian war of 2006–7. Thus I had to get in touch with the person I was meeting right after passing the last checkpoint so as to obtain the precise address where the meeting would take place. The offices always looked like any other residential building and were often shared by several organizations.

Despite this difficult context, almost all the numerous meetings I organized for participant observation and interviews took place at the agreed time. If the security situation made a particular meeting complicated, it would be rescheduled. All the people I met gave me their undivided attention during our discussions and often offered to meet again should I require. Similarly, most of the cultural and political events and mobilizations organized by civil society and women's organizations would take place, often with stop and search at the entrance, even the day

after a dreadful explosion in the same area. Moreover, I was struck by how the scholars, activists, and individuals I met for this research gave much importance and commitment to our meetings. I was often received very warmly, and my research given a lot of attention despite my young age and whether or not I was related to the person through family, neighborhood, or a personal acquaintance. It became clear that the women I wanted to meet were eager to talk, share their thoughts and ideas, and contribute to the research itself. Many of my interviewees expressed feelings of being "stuck" in and "suffocated" by a city of walls, separations, and checkpoints. I was also told that they were even happier that my research would also be accessible to the "outside world."

I called Fatima A. after passing the checkpoint of Medinat al-Sadr. I was introduced to Fatima through other activists, who described her as engaged and sincere. From the car window, I saw her standing in front of an innocuous middle-class-looking residential house. She was smiling and looked quite elegant. In her midforties and wearing a long brown skirt, purple cardigan, and a short flowery head scarf, Fatima shook my hand and kissed me several times. Because I usually mentioned al-Kazimiyya on the phone when being guided to a meeting location, I was often greeted with remarks such as, "What a brave young woman you are, coming here from al-Kazimiyya to meet us." This comment was often followed by someone else saying, "This is the Iraqi woman." On entering the office, I was welcomed by a young man – the secretary – and several young female activists. Similar to the majority of my first encounters in such offices, I tour the offices, I am introduced to everyone, and then invited to sit in the director's or general secretary's room. Soon after I begin introducing myself and my research, I am served tea, water, and sweets. Often I am asked if the temperature of the room is okay or if the air conditioner should be turned on. In such cases, the cuts to public electricity is always mentioned, as well as the ridiculous prices of private electric companies. During a two-hour conversation, the electricity always cut out at least once, bringing a sort of intimacy and agreeable silence, because the loud and annoying generators can be heard everywhere in the city.

After casual conversation about families, region, neighborhood, the traffic, and insecurity, I always ask permission to record the interview, indicating that doing so allowed me to focus on the discussion rather than on taking notes. Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that recording is easily accepted, almost naturally, by many activists who had not experienced repression or exile – mostly those of the younger generation (thirties and forties). Older activists would also accept, but with hesitation, because many of them had experienced repression from the previous regime. Fatima –

forty-five years old – accepted being recorded straightaway because she had heard about my research from others I had interviewed previously. She heard that I had come from exile and was working on women's political activism and rights in Iraq. She did not ask for details about me and my family; she considered me to be a colleague and a trustworthy person. As a founding member of the Iraqi Women Network (IWN) and the Baghdad Women's Association, Fatima spoke of her involvement in the women's movement that emerged after the fall of the regime. She mentioned her love for Medinat al-Sadr, where she has lived her whole life, and her role as a representative at the Municipal Council of Baghdad. Fatima described her family background as "conservative and political" and spoke about her experience of discrimination under the previous regime. Because one of her brothers was an active member of the Daʿwa Party, she could not get a job in the education sector after completing a BA in biology. She describes the environment of and her involvement in Medinat al-Sadr.

I grew up in Medinat al-Sadr, with all the political changes it has experienced. I think that the situation of this neighborhood is exceptional. It is a particularly conservative area, a tribal environment. It has slowed down our work in the past period, but we are trying to be active despite that.

Despite being from a Daʿwa family and growing up in a conservative environment dominated by Islamist Shiʿa militancy, Fatima chose to get involved in nonsectarian, nonreligious independent women's groups. She is also a representative in the Medinat al-Sadr Council; she ran as a candidate of one of the main Shiʿa political groups – Tayar al-Islah, which includes Islamist and non-Islamist Shiʿa political activists – to join this council. What she told me, of course, is as important as what she did not tell me, and the context in which our conversation took place is as important as the discussion itself. After our formal conversation, we met several other times at meetings, gatherings, and conferences. Through these informal encounters, I got to know her better and understand her background, trajectory, and personal story.

I chose to begin this chapter by describing how I made appointments with a prominent woman activist from Medinat al-Sadr because most of these activists are members of the communal and political groups that were marginalized under the previous regime. Medinat al-Sadr, its political culture and marginalized population, has moved from the margins to the center since 2003. I also chose Fatima to illustrate a particular feature of the post-2003 situation: the institutionalization of ethnosectarianism. Despite being an independent woman's rights and civil society activist involved in a nonreligious and nonsectarian activism, Fatima is also a representative of a Shiʿa political list that she joined in order to run for

the provincial council election because the Iraqi political system since 2003 relies on ethnosectarian quotas. How I conducted my research and the choices I made regarding my identity in relation to the different spaces and individuals with whom I interacted gave me a very concrete sense of the realities of postinvasion Baghdad. It is a context characterized by sectarian violence, powerful Islamist militias roaming the streets, and the legacy of the Ba'th authoritarian regime: decades of war and thirteen years of harsh economic sanctions. This chapter seeks to explore the post-2003 context and the ways in which women activists have experienced postinvasion Iraq, focusing particularly on women representatives. How did women activists experience the fall of the regime and the occupation? What characterizes their lives since 2003? How did they participate, if at all, in the post-2003 regime? How did this context affect their legal rights and political activism within the new Iraqi government and institutions?

The Colonial Invasion and Occupation

Experiencing the Fall of the Ba'th Regime

Iraqi women activists told me that in the months leading up to the US invasion of Iraq. They were very anxious about the war. Even political activists who welcomed the fall of the regime, and those that specifically cheered US intervention, feared another war. The trauma of the US-led bombings in 1991 was still present. Aziza S. – a prominent Shi'a Islamist who conducted underground political activities opposing the Ba'th regime in Baghdad – was traumatized by the 1991 bombings. She describes how the events of 1991 made "her breast milk dry" and how much she feared another US-led military intervention:

The terror of 1991 stayed in my mind . . . Yes, of course we wanted the regime to fall, but not through violence. We were following the news at the time. Despite the fact that satellite dishes were forbidden by the regime, we managed to get some news of what being discussed by the Americans. Sometimes we managed to get recordings of TV programs from people abroad. We did not want to experience the horror of the bombings again. But it did happen, and it did provoke another trauma, once again, inside of us and in our children's memories. Until now I remember it, my house was in al-Mansur neighborhood at the time. Our street was one of the last streets in the neighborhood that the Americans entered: Hay al-'Arabi Street. My son was in the garden and he heard everything. I think that it provoked a real psychological trauma for him. We did not want the Americans to

come, we wanted change in another way. But for sure, the fall of the regime was necessary.

A few years after the invasion, Aziza lost her son and sister; they were assassinated in the sectarian violence that followed the fall of the regime.

Noor S. was not politically active before 2003. She was convinced that the regime had become weak and would have fallen without external intervention. She narrates her experience of the invasion.

In 2003, the arrival of the Americans shook me. We were afraid of war. We were people who hated war, we were so tired of war. My parents were from the generation who witnessed the death of the royal family, and they had very sad memories of it: all the blood, pain, and fear. Then, the war with Iran, the missiles, the death, we were tired of all of that. Honestly, when we heard about the war, we first thought that it was another crisis that would pass, that they were just threatening the regime. Also, we were all seeing that the regime was destroying itself; it was weak. We were not people who welcomed the Americans. We were afraid, afraid for our lives. My mother was afraid for her kids and her grandkids . . . After the fall and the American bombings, I was [in] shock, I could not even move, I stayed home. I kept asking myself: "Where is the state we used to know?" Everything fell so fast, in a blow, nothing was left. I did not go out the first weeks after the arrival of the Americans. At the time, there were no mobiles phones; we had only a landline, and it was cut. My mother was so used to wars and crisis that she had already prepared stocks of food. This anxiety was always present.

Noor lost her sister and her brother in the outbreak of sectarian violence in Baghdad. Her sister died in 2004 and her brother in 2007, leaving behind a son and two sons, respectively. As her mother died shortly after "from the shock of losing her children," Noor became the main caretaker for her three nephews.

Like Noor, many of my interviewees felt that war was not the only way to change the regime. Some believed that the regime would have fallen in a way similar to the recent Arab uprisings. Maysoon S. – a Sunni Islamist – expresses this point of view:

Of course, we all wanted this regime to end, but not necessarily in this way. We all have now witnessed what happened in Tunisia and Egypt especially. When people want their regime to fall, then they provoke a revolution and preserve their revolution. In our case, a foreign, Western country came and made the whole country fall, a state with all its institutions. This is not a proper way to act. We know that their objective was to make an entire people fall.

With regard to views of the occupation, there is a noticeable difference between the women I interviewed and the women of the diaspora interviewed by Al-Ali (2007). Exiled women activists were more supportive of the war and hopeful about the fall of the regime; women inside Iraq were

more anxious and negative. The differences in their feelings about 2003 are clearly linked to their personal experiences. Iraqis in the diaspora wished to "come back," while those inside Iraq wanted to avoid the worst scenario.

Some of the Iraqi activists I interviewed – all of whom were directly victims of Ba'th authoritarian repression – were in favor of the war. However, even those who favored war expressed their shock and revulsion at the US-led occupation, which was legitimized by UN Security Council Resolution 1483 (adopted May 2003). Naziha A. – a prominent Shi'a activist and MP since the fall of the regime – is such a person. Her brother was executed by the Ba'th regime in 1990.

We were happy for the 2003 war, because we were following news that told us it was a war of liberation. After, we were hurt, because we were already upset by the fact that our army did not liberate us from Saddam. Also, it has to be noted that there was only a very small elite that supported the regime at the end. After the Americans came, we criticized this elite, and we were saying that it was the role of the Iraqi army to liberate us. We should not have needed to ask a foreign army. I can tell you, however, that when the Americans entered, we felt joy and happiness to be finally liberated from this regime. But the blow, the shock we experienced when the UN Security Council Resolution stated that we were "occupied"! This was an occupation. Then, we began to fight. I joined the National Iraqi Association, and I began my political involvement in 2003. Straight after the fall, we were consulting our great *marje'*, the great Ayatollah al-Sistani, and the other *maraje'* around him. I was ready to do all that I could to struggle against the occupiers.

Moreover, most of the Iraqi activists from all backgrounds expressed the opinion that the US administration already held Iraq's destiny in its hands; Iraqis were not free to decide the future of their country. The most common example given was that of the 1991 uprising and the fact that the US-led coalition "decided" not to support Iraqis in *their* attempt to overthrow the regime. Shayma N., who hails from a Shi'a Islamist family that was severely repressed by the regime expressed this opinion.

I had many concerns about the American intervention, because when Iraqis revolted in 1991, when they were at the point of making the regime fall by themselves, the Americans repressed them and let the Ba'th regime massacre them. So, as many, I had totally understood that they are the ones who decide, and that it will be only when they have decided that the regime would fall. Today, there is much research proving that the Iraqi opposition attempted many times to end the Ba'th regime, including attempts by some of the regime's officers. All these attempts failed for one simple reason: the Americans were informing Saddam of these attempts to overthrow his regime. This is why it is only when the Americans decide that the regime will fall, that the regime can fall. It is as simple as that.

The invasion of Iraq, coupled with the bombings and fights that occurred between March and May 2003, led to around 150,000 civilian deaths.[1] Among the activists I interviewed, one lost her husband in the US-led coalition bombings. Most of the activists lost relatives or were the direct targets of violence (explosions and assassination attempts) in the outbreak of sectarian conflict after 2004. After the establishment of the occupation administration through the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the establishment of governing councils based on communal – ethnic, religious, and sectarian – quotas, Iraqis' daily lives began to be characterized by violence.

Human Rights Abuse and Sexual Violence

The invasion and occupation itself could be considered as a form of human rights abuse; however, despite the opposition of the UN Security Council, it was later given legitimacy by UN resolutions. The United Nations provided administrative support and a frame to the US-led occupation administration. From the very beginning of the occupation, organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and many observers provided reports on human rights abuses of the population at the hands of the occupying forces. The massive and indiscriminate imprisonment of the opposition to the occupation; the inhuman, brutal, and unspeakable treatment of prisoners that made famous the name of Abu Ghraib prison; and the sexual violence committed by soldiers of the occupying army, including toward children, are all well-known realities today. The normalization of violence, torture, and inhuman treatment on a large scale justified by the war itself and then under the name of the "War on Terror" has altered Iraqi society. It has also paved the way to the new Iraqi regime in its handling of dissent and opposition, as I will show later in this chapter.

As pointed out by a Human Rights Watch report (2003) on sexual violence and the abduction of women and girls in Baghdad, the "climate of fear" and the failure of the occupying power to protect women and girls from violence and redress it when it occurred had both direct and long-term consequences for the safety of women and girls and for their participation in postwar life in Iraq. According to many observers, sexual violence against Iraqi women was widespread and far more extensive than the cells of Abu Ghraib. The proliferation of different forms of

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[1] Estimated according to *The Lancet* (2004), Iraq Body Count, available at www.iraqbodycount.org, and Iraq: The Human Cost, available at web.mit.edu/humancostIraq/.

prostitution and sex trafficking of women and girls within Iraq and in the region has been widely documented.

The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) opened its offices at the very beginning of the occupation and worked on sheltering and providing care and assistance to women victims of abuse, sexual violence, and trafficking. The OWFI's report (2010) shows very clearly how much the very invasion and occupation provoked the rise of sex trafficking of women and girls in the country and how much the social chaos and the security vacuum created situations of extreme vulnerability for women and girls. OWFI is still today the only organization that provides shelters for women victim of abuse in Iraq (with the exclusion of Iraqi Kurdistan) because such shelters are still considered illegal by the central government.

Destruction of the State and Imposition of a Fragmented Nationhood

The preparation of the Iraqi National Council – a group of opposition political leaders – and the US administration for the invasion of Iraq, as in the famous London Congress, along with the political process of the Anglo-American occupation exacerbated the implosion of Iraqi society that began in the 1990s. If the wars, the violent and repressive nature of the Ba'th authoritarian regime, and the general impoverishment brought on by UN sanctions had already deeply affected the social and cultural fabric of Iraq, the invasion and occupation only pushed the process of social and political implosion to its extreme. As J. Ismael and T. Ismael (2015) argue, the terrible situation of sectarian violence and political crisis that Iraq is experiencing today has not simply "happened" but were foreseeable consequences of a set of policy choices taken by occupation authorities supported by the new Iraqi elite composed of former exiles that the occupiers have brought to power. As observed by many (Z. Al-Ali 2014; Arato 2009; Dawisha 2009; J. Ismael & T. Ismael 2015), instead of a pretended "state building," the CPA, led by Paul Bremer, and the whole execution and administration of the invasion and occupation itself provoked the very destruction of the Iraqi state and imposed a fragmented version of Iraqi nationhood. The destruction of the state was engineered through the "de-Ba'athification" campaign launched by the CPA and supported by the new elite. The de-Ba'thification policies were both perceived as anti-Sunni and failed to truly expel Ba'th leaders from positions of power. The dissolution of the Iraqi army and administration forced hundreds of thousands qualified staff and soldiers into unemployment (J. Ismael & T. Ismael 2015; Lafourcade 2007). The de-Ba'thification was used by leaders of the new political elite to marginalize

many Sunni individuals who formed the social elite of the former regime such as university professors and administrators of the former state (Lafourcade 2012). In addition to being perceived by the Sunni political leadership as a clear tool of discrimination against them, it also deprived the new state of experienced administrators and a skilled social base. In addition to that, the US-led occupation administration integrated the politicized Shi'a Islamist militias in the army, which introduced sectarian elements into it.

At the economic level, Paul Bremer, head of the CPA, put in place aggressive economic policies that infuriated Iraq's business class, some of whom responded by funding the insurgency. His policies kept of the legacy of Saddam's regime only the laws that restricted collective bargaining and trade unions. He introduced a set of laws in September 2003 to bring in transnational corporations, lowering corporate taxes from almost 40 to 15 percent, permitting foreign companies to own 100 percent of Iraqi assets, and entirely exempting corporations working with the CPA from taxation. Foreign companies, especially oil companies, were entitled to leases or contracts that could remain in effect for forty years, and foreign banks were favored with the same terms (J. Ismael & T. Ismael 2015: 13–39).

Arato (2009) describes in details how the occupation itself produced all the ingredients of the failure of the new state from the very elaboration of the Iraqi Transitional Administrative Law, supposed to be an interim Constitution during the provisional governments (Iraqi Governing Council from July 2003 to June 2004 and then the Iraqi Interim Government from June 2005 to May 2005, replaced the same year by the first post-2003 permanent government), to the drafting by the Iraqi Constitution Drafting Committee and then adoption of the new Constitution through referendum in October 2005. As I will illustrate through the example of the direct appointment of a women representative by the CPA, members of the Iraqi Governing Council were chosen by the occupation administration according to a sectarian, limited, and prejudiced vision of the Iraqi people. As shown by Arato (2009: 1–57), the whole process was exclusionary and hierarchical: Iraqis themselves were treated as advisors rather than being the real decision makers, and all the groups that were critical of the invasion were excluded, such as Sunni political groups and the Sadrists. The Constitution-building process was characterized by a neoimperial modality of imposition despite the interventions of Ayatollah Sistani that were aimed at guarantying the indigeneity of the process (Z. Al-Ali 2014: 75–102; Arato 2009, 99–134). In the end, and despite the very marginalization of the opposition, the new Constitution was adopted in 2005 through a referendum.

If for Arato the very process carried all the elements of failure of the state's so-called reconstruction, according to Romano (2014), the Constitution that was adopted provided the essential elements for a functioning state. It is the evisceration, especially by al-Maliki's regime, of key components of the Constitution, such as the decentralization and power sharing that were never respected, that led to the total alienation of Iraq's disparate Sunni Arab populations. As I will illustrate in Chapter 6, dedicated to the issue of women's legal rights and Article 41 of the Constitution and its implications regarding the PSC, the Constitution has a number of ambiguities. However, it generally describes the new Iraqi system as a federal state in which the system of government is republican, representative, parliamentary, and democratic (Article 1). The Constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion of the state and a source of legislation while also guarantying "full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as Christians, Yazidis, and Mandean Sabeans" (Article 2). As pointed out by Romano (2014), Shi'a Islamist parties originally preferred stronger wording of Islam as "the source of legislation" but compromised with secular parties on the issue. Articles 3 and 4 recognize "multiple nationalities, religions and sects" as belonging to the country, which at the same time is "a founding and active member in the Arab League and is committed to its charter, and it [Iraq] is part of the Islamic world." This, too, represented a compromise between Arab and Kurdish negotiators, since the Arabs originally wanted wording recognizing Iraq as an Arab state. Article 4 recognizes Arabic and Kurdish as the two official languages of Iraq but also guarantees other groups such as Turkmens, Assyrians, and Armenians the right to educate their children in their mother tongue in government schools. Very importantly, the Constitution grants equality of all citizens in the Article 14: "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status." The Constitution makes clear that Iraq's election law will aim to achieve a 25 percent female membership in the Council of Representatives. In addition, the Constitution requires that "violence and abuse in the family, school and society shall be prohibited," as is "trafficking of women and children, and [the] sex trade." The Constitution also lays out civil and political rights of individuals in Iraq comparable to that of any Western state and guaranties economic, social, and cultural liberties that even go farther than those of some Western states, including "the right to health care" and provisions for "the handicapped and those with special needs" (Romano 2014). It also includes injunctions against unlawful detention and torture of any kind

and guarantees "freedom of expression using all means" – including "freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration" – provided that the exercise of these freedoms does not "violate public order or morality."

The issues of federalism and share of the country's oil and gas resources were central to the debates, and tensions between Kurdish and Shi'a representatives, on the one hand, advocating for federalism and the other political groups, on the other hand, advocating for centralization. As I will show in Chapter 6, federalism was placed over women's rights even by many women activists. Despite stating that oil and gas resources are owned by all the people of Iraq, the Constitution articles related to the way the resources should be managed and the possible autonomy of Iraq's regions are at the core of the political crisis involving the opposition of the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) today. The status of Kirkuk and its oil fields has led to military clashes since the Kurdish referendum in the fall of 2017. According to many, as a result of the central government's mismanagement, corruption, and nepotism, many political groups who initially favored a centralized state, such as Sunni and secular groups, are now pushing for more decentralization.

Very importantly, nothing in the Constitution ever applied ethnosectarian quotas or allocated certain positions (president, prime minister, etc.) to specific ethnosectarian groups. The only quotas included are for non-Muslims and women in the Council of Representatives. The very essential aspect of the post-2003 regime is the institutionalization of communal-based identities – ethnic, religious, and sectarian – and especially ethnosectarian divisions between Arabs and Kurds and Sunnis and Shi'as. In addition to the effect of the de-Ba'athification, the colonial process that characterized the establishment of the new political regime – government and Constitution – led by the CPA, the very institutionalization of a political system in which communal identities are the core of the state's organization, is what led Iraq to the sectarian war. The Iraqi Governing Council members were selected by the CPA according to ethnic, religious, and sectarian quotas, which corresponds to a rupture with the Iraqi political system that was based – at least in principle – on equal citizenship. Since 2003, following the CPA projection of a fragmented Iraqi identity based on ethnic, sectarian, and religious belonging, the new political system – government, parties, and ministries – is based on communal belongings because seats and positions are distributed to representatives of ethnic, religious, or sectarian communities. According to this communal quota system, the president should be Kurdish, the vice-president should be a Shi'a and a Sunni, the prime minister should be Shi'a, the vice prime ministers

should be Kurdish and Shiʿa, the president of the Parliament should be Sunni, and the vice-presidents should be Shiʿa and Kurdish, and this principle is applied for all ministries, security apparatus, and institutions. As a result, the electoral law, as well as the whole functioning of the political system – designation of the president and vice-president and the distribution of ministries, political parties, and provincial and parliamentary seats – functions according to *nizam al-muhasasa* – the quota system – based on communal identities.

The US army's repression of uprisings against the occupation – especially in Fallujah, where napalm and poison gas were used, and Najaf – and the rise of political and party-associated militias benefiting from the power vacuum all took a sectarian shape (International Crisis Group 2008a, 2008b). The exacerbation of sectarian conflict reached its extreme during the 2006–7 sectarian war. This civil war, and all the associated events, represented the third turning point in Iraqi sectarian relations, the first being the war with Iran and the second the repression of the 1991 uprisings (Haddad 2010). Since the fall, but even more after the dreadful events of 2006–27, sectarian violence reorganized society and territory. Such is visible in the division of Baghdad into homogeneously Sunni and Shiʿa neighborhoods, each of which is controlled by different militias, divided and fragmented by concrete walls, and by checkpoints of the occupation administration and the new Iraqi army (Damluji 2010; Pieri 2014). Sunnis have been threatened by the rise to power of conservative, competing sectarian militias in the streets, as mentioned previously the integration of sectarian armed groups into the state's security apparatus, and the Shiʿa Islamist parties' consolidation of central power and its associated sectarian and discriminatory policies.

The very nature of the new political elite that came back from decades of exile is also central to the crisis because it was dominated by those who had been at the margins of the previous Iraqi state, Kurds and Shiʿas, and had their own experience and memory of the Iraqi nation. Their claims of victimhood and demands for compensation and reward for being oppressed and marginalized contributed to a redefinition of Iraqi nationhood (Z. Al-Ali 2014; Al-Rachid 2010: 315–45; Tejtel et al. 2012; Harling 2012). As I will show via the mentality of many women's rights activists, the idea of belonging to an ethnosectarian group – Kurd or Shiʿa – that suffered from the repression of the Baʿth regime has been developed as an ideology of *mazlumiyya* – victimhood – and, for some, revanchism. The *mazlumiyya* ideology also characterizes the new state's official narratives, with officials putting forward their own versions of events that marked Iraqi social and political history: the Baʿth regime is depicted as solely driven by bloody communalism – ethnic and

sectarian – and the entire Ba'th era was characterized as one of violence and dictatorship. In the post-2003 context, more nuanced points of view and narratives not built around celebration of the Iraqi political opposition to the Ba'th regime are rare among the elite of the new regime. The area that is today Iraqi Kurdistan developed and progressed according to its own political agenda, with narratives of nationhood, symbolism, and memory of 1991. In Arab Iraq, the sectarian divide has been exacerbated. On the one hand, the "Shi'a revival" (Haddad 2010, 2014) – its narratives of victimhood, affirmation of political memory and religious history, and show of force – emerged. The affirmation of memory and history is commemorated ostensibly through Shi'a rituals and symbolism – such as the 'Ashura and Arba'in ceremonies in Najaf and Karbala, visits to the holy shrines, and celebrations associated with the Twelve Imams. On the other hand, the Sunni population has lost its symbolic majority despite the fact that the Ba'th regime only privileged very specific tribes and clans. The nationhood Sunnis related to under the Ba'th regime were fundamentally questioned by the moves from the margins to the center of political power by Kurdish nationalists and Shi'a Islamists.

Most of the welfare measures are directed at families of the *shuhada'* ("martyrs"). Victims of the Ba'th regime are entitled to land and money compensation for their loss and exile, whereas victims of the sectarian conflicts can apply for lower compensation. As pointed out by Khoury (2013: 248), the orders of martyrs and the different levels of citizenship associated with them by the former regime have been totally challenged in post-2003 Iraq. The new political elite that came from exile decided that the first order of *shuhada'* is composed of those connected with the ruling Shi'a elite who died in the Iranian territories fighting in the Badr Brigade, whereas those who died in Iraqi prisons under the Ba'th regime are of second order. In contrast to the situation under the Ba'th regime, those who died or had been imprisoned during the Iran-Iraq War or the First Gulf War are excluded from privileges. Thus the new regime created its own hierarchical citizenship according to its own vision – tinted by ethnosectarianism – of who is a good and a bad citizen.

For Kurdish women activists, especially those affiliated with either of the two main Kurdish nationalist parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the fall of the regime and the US-led invasion were not even a subject of conversation. Iraqi Kurdistan acquired its autonomy through the "Safe Haven" operation in 1991, which aimed to protect the Kurdish population from Saddam's military and chemical attacks. US and international nongovernmental organization (NGO) funds were welcomed by the Kurdish political elite and not debated among most activists. Some are indeed apologetic

regarding the invasion that allowed the Kurdish region to become almost completely independent from the rest of the country. Kurdish women activists' enthusiasm is as strong as their experience of repression and violence under the former regime.

Among the communities targeted by the Ba'th regime, Faili Kurds were certainly the most vulnerable. Both Kurds and Shi'as, this community experienced displacement and deportation from the north of the country to the center and south as part of the regime's 1970s and 1980s policy of "Arabization." Bushra Z., quoted earlier, experienced this displacement. She is an active member of a Shi'a women's organization in Baghdad affiliated with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. Bushra wants to set up a civil society organization that does not have any religious affiliation and is focused solely on the defense of women's rights.

Americans were our saviors! Until today. Unfortunately, some of our Shi'a brothers are now opposed to them, we [Faili Kurds] think that it is an expression of contempt toward us. Who else saved us from the oppression we were living? We were waiting to be rescued. According to us, the one who is against Americans is a Ba'thi, because he does not care about our suffering . . . How come could we refuse the help of the Americans! My family and I experienced an oppression that Allah only knows, just because we are Shi'as. If countries are sensitive to our cause and offer their help and financial support, I am honored to work with them. So, it is an honor for me, because America is a powerful country. If I am able to help, even just one member of our community, I will be very satisfied.

Bushra's point of view was common among the Kurdish activists I met; very few Arab activists speak of the US intervention in such a positive way. Bushra's words reveal the impact of suffering and a desire to be acknowledged as victims of the previous regime. Opening a new page in Iraq's history cannot be done without recognizing the pain and suffering experienced in the previous era. Bushra's words also reveal the feeling of vulnerability of the groups targeted by Saddam's regime. The Ba'th's victims, political exiles, and many other Iraqis expressed their fear of a return to the Ba'th age. The feeling of being threatened by a potential return of the Ba'thists is very strong among activists, especially those who have a record of opposition and repression. For many, this fear explains both their collaboration with the occupation administration and their near acceptance of the political situation. When I mentioned the CPA's de-Ba'athification measures, most activists who had experienced repression and exile replied, "Do you really believe that we got rid of the Ba'thists?" or "Ba'thists are still around, and some are still in power." Certainly, a desire to be recognized as victims and fear of the old regime's return characterized the transition to the new era; these feelings are at the core of understanding the political realities of post-2003 Iraq.

Postinvasion Iraq: Sectarian Violence, Conservatism, and the New Iraqi Regime

Sectarian Violence, Conservatism, Weakness, and Dysfunction of the New State

The invasion put an end to the United Nation's economic sanctions and thus had a considerable impact on Iraqis' average income. Nevertheless, the push for liberalization, privatization, and foreign investment (J. Ismael & T. Ismael 2015), especially favoring US economic interests, is a feature of the post-2003 context. Bremer felt that Iraq was still a rentier state, and the deterioration of its oil fields during the war, as well as OPEC policies, ensured that it took the country some time to be able to fully exploit its oil revenues (Bayt al-Hikma 2009). Moreover, in order for Iraq to overcome the dramatic impact of the sanctions and wars on its infrastructure, education, health, and state services, a well-managed plan of reconstruction and development would be required, a plan that had not yet been put forth because of the mismanagement and corruption[2] of its political elite (Z. Al-Ali 2014; J. Ismael & T. Ismael 2015: 13–39). Considered to be the biggest corruption scandal in history, the money for "reconstruction" – provided by the United States and the UN Programs for Development and Habitat in the first years of the occupation – had evaporated from the country (Lafourcade 2007). The money cannot be found in the city streets, buildings, and infrastructure or in the country's education, health, and welfare sectors. As pointed out by Zaid Al-Ali (2014: 103–24), corruption in its institutional form and through nepotism constitutes a major cause of political and sectarian violence in Iraq.

I argue in line with Yousif (2016) that Iraq's economic situation since 2003 has to be read as a continuation of the sanctions period. Postinvasion Iraq has pursued the path that started in the 1990s, characterized by continued deterioration of its infrastructures and state services, and this despite the end of the economic sanctions in 2003. Both Yousif (2010) and Sassoon (2016) pointed out the very "political economy" of sectarianism in Iraq and its devastating impact on the functioning of state services and vital institutions. Corruption is deeply rooted in the ethnosectarian political system that creates new forms of nepotism based on communal belongings. Iraq's rentier economy relies on its oil resources managed by the state; thus a political system characterized by ethnosectarian corruption has proven to be totally dysfunctional. Therefore, instead of addressing the

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[2] In 2014, Iraq ranked among the ten most corrupted countries in the world.

economic and social crisis in which the country has been plunged since 1990s, the postinvasion era has pursued the crisis, giving it an ethnosectarian nature.

Moreover, the new regime seems to be following in the footsteps of the previous regime in terms of armament and security spending. The sectarian conflicts and military operation against the Islamic State organization (IS) in the north of the country explain the new regime's spending in those fields, but there seems to be no indication of an end to the cycle of violence started in 2003. Since the sanctions, poverty and illiteracy have become the main features of Iraqi society, and unemployment has reached 30 percent. There is a housing crisis and lack of basic services – such as access to running water and electricity, especially in the countryside. This is the situation more than a decade after the fall of the regime. In 2007, over half the Iraqi population lived on less than one dollar a day. Acute malnutrition has more than doubled since 2003, affecting no less than 43 percent of all children between the age of six months and five years by the summer of 2007. Forty-three percent of all households have been deprived of healthy sanitation facilities. There is a critical lack of drugs and medical equipment, and more than 15,000 doctors have been killed, kidnapped, or fled the country. Even in Baghdad, the state provides a maximum of five hours of electricity per day (Z. Al-Ali 2014; Dawisha 2009). In addition, the lack of control and stability since 2003, as well as the privatization and liberalization of the economy, provoked a drastic increase in the prices of staple goods and necessities. As a result, most Iraqis are poor while living in a rich country. No major plan or policies have been undertaken by the new regime to deal with these issues. The state, already weakened by more than a decade of sanctions, appears to be absent in its role as a social and economic provider

Between 2006 and 2007, the sectarian civil war claimed an average of 1,000 lives per week, mostly civilian, and both internally and externally displaced around 2.5 million according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The weekly (if not daily) explosions and assassinations still persist today. The invasion by IS of Mosul in June 2014 and parts of northern Iraq exacerbated sectarian tensions and plunged the country again into a cycle of war and militarization.

Heba I. witnessed the rise of sectarianism, even among educated and urban intellectuals, when she returned to Iraq in 2004. She also noticed the atmosphere of chaos and lawlessness in the country.

Coming back from Yemen, I was anxious to see American soldiers walking in our streets. I wondered how I would react to it, and I was afraid of suffering too much because of it. But in fact, what hurt me very deeply was not that. When I crossed the border, I found a country whose borders were not controlled by anyone; left in surrender. I carried with me many books from Yemen, as there was nobody to control my possessions. The driver laughed when he saw my surprise at the fact that my passport was not even checked. This broke me. I don't like talking about that. But like we say, the personal is political. And everything I just said is political. I believe in that … The first thing I did when I came back was to go to al-Mutannabi to see my friends. I was shocked by the mentality I found there. People with whom I grew up experienced the wars and sanctions, all these people that I used to know for so many years were beginning to think in a very different way from how they used to think. I was thinking: "do we need a dictatorship to feel that we are all Iraqis?" Now, everyone agrees upon a way of thinking that is so far removed from how we used to think. We talk based on identity words, we categorize: "the one who opposes the war is a Baʿthi; this one is from that community, and this one is from the other." The way of thinking changed so much. It hurt me so much when I came back.

Sectarian violence impacted women's activists' everyday lives. Among the activists I interviewed, most experienced the violence of postinvasion Iraq directly through the death of a spouse, brother, sister, cousin, or neighbor. Explosives are the number one cause of women's mortality in Iraq, as well as the leading cause of damage to the healthcare infrastructure (WILPF 2014). Both women and men adapt to make their way around Baghdad; the most common strategy is to avoid crossing sectarian boundaries, staying within one's own neighborhood. In this context, a representative or public figure is exposed to violence in a peculiar way. Wafa F., for example, was married to a representative in the Fallujah Provincial Council. Her husband, a Shiʿa Islamist, was killed in front of Wafa and her three kids at the front door of their house by armed men emptying by force the area of Shiʿas. After the execution of her husband, Wafa was warned that she had to leave the city if she wanted to stay alive. She left with her kids and settled in a popular Shiʿa neighborhood of Baghdad. A housewife for almost a decade, Wafa had to turn over a new leaf and look for a job to provide for her family; she got involved in the Al-Fazila Party, a Shiʿa Islamist party, that offered her protection and support. Most of the women activists I interviewed, especially public and media figures, have received death threats or been directly targeted by violence – e.g., car bomb attacks in front of their offices or homes. Some had to flee the country or live in the Green Zone of Baghdad, but many remain in Baghdad. Some moved into areas controlled by their sects because their neighborhoods were attacked by sectarian militias.

Ibtihal I., age thirty-nine, a very active women's rights activist of al-Rabita narrated how, in an attempt to kill her, a group of men placed

explosives in front of her house and made it explode in 2007. The event occurred after she had received several death threats from conservative Islamist militias in the form of phone calls and messages. Fortunately, no one was in the house at the time. Ibtihal speaks of the police incompetence and lack of will to help her find the perpetrators of the attack and provide her protection. She describes the atmosphere of Baghdad in 2006–7 and her feelings about it.

You know, in 2006 and 2007, after 2 PM, the streets of Baghdad were empty. There was no life in Baghdad. The next day, everything opened at 8 AM. But people were scared to go out very early or later than 2 PM. Violence was everywhere. Armed groups, death threats, militias – the everyday reality was terrible, frightful. Until today, you know, the value of life is lost in Iraq. Any disagreement between political leaders ends up with violence in the streets. We face death every single day; every Iraqi who goes out of his house is not certain that he will come back alive. Iraq transformed into a scene of death. Even when we have moments of joy, we feel that we are stealing those moments, and we then refrain ourselves saying *Allah yesterna* ["May God protect us"]. The worse is that we do not even have a state, a government from whom we could seek protection or complain.

The new class of politicians, selected according to ethnosectarian lines, built political support through appeals to tribe or sect rather than constructive visions of national reconstruction and Iraqi nationhood. Thus the sectarian dimension of the social retribalization observed by many that started under the Ba'th regime was pushed even further in the chaos that followed the invasion. If the retribalization carries its conservative dimensions especially in terms of women and gender issues as rightly noted by J. Ismael and S. Ismael (2008, 2007), it has also been analyzed in terms of the society's retrieval of its indigenous functioning in a climate dominated by armed Islamist militias. As observed by more recent research, such as that by Carroll (2011) and Hamoudi, Al-Sharaa, and Al-Dahhan (2015), far from resenting state law, Iraq's tribes, often embrace Iraq's state law and regard tribal law as being in cooperation with the state in maintaining order within their respective social field. Tribal Shaikhs in Baghdad (Carroll 2011) and in southern Iraq (Hamoudi, Al-Sharaa, & Al-Dahhan 2015) all expressed longing for a just, functioning state legal system and resentment that they had to take on so many roles that should have been handled by the state. In addition to this, this recent research also points out that in the current climate of lawlessness and absence of a functioning and transparent judicial system away from corruption and sectarian conflict, the tribal modes of reconciliation, being cross-sectarian in their very nature because tribes are composed of both sects, have been more efficient than the state in dealing with extremely violent sectarian conflicts. Shaikhs are

concerned by the repartition of their territories according to sectarian lines as a result of conflicts of the new competing forces represented by armed militias. Moreover, because armed militias are related to the government, individuals who do not have any relation to the new political elite would turn to their local Shaikhs to administrate their issues or resolve conflicts. As rightly pointed out by Carroll (2011), during the widespread and terrible political and sectarian violence of 2006–7 and beyond, it was difficult to settle on the conflict because violence was generalized and sometimes anonymous, and only the tribal system created forgiveness and communal cross-sectarian reconciliation.

In addition to the overall insecurity that led to the death of many Iraqi women activists, most of the women I interviewed noticed how the rise of conservative gender norms affected their dress and ability to move freely in specific neighborhoods of Baghdad. Because many neighborhoods are controlled by militias and armed groups backed by conservative sectarian Islamist parties, many women have witnessed or experienced incidents regarding clothing or behavior when crossing checkpoints. Even Christian women activists prefer to wear a loose shawl over their head when moving between the capital's different neighborhoods. More generally, in Sunni-dominated cities, women often wear a *jubba* [*hijab* and long overcoat]; in Shi'a-dominated cities, such as in the southern region, women often wear a black *'abaya* over their *hijab* and cover their feet with black socks. Many of the women I interviewed described incidents such as the closing of hair salons and car bomb attacks to forbid women from driving.

In addition to sectarian violence committed by conservative Islamist militias, women political activists have also been subject to violence for being part of the opposition to the new regime. Infiltration of hooded armed men and saboteurs in the demonstration against the government is now a feature of the Iraqi political scene. More generally, an overwhelming sense of tension has been created by the violence, checkpoints, T-walls, ethnic, religious and sectarian fragmentation of Baghdad, and the dominance of competing armed militias in the streets. This feeling was expressed repeatedly to me: "Before we had one Saddam; today we have a Saddam at every street corner." Many forms of human rights abuse and indiscriminate arrests and imprisonment of civil society activists by government forces have been reported. During my interviews, I was told by many women's rights activists that the repression of political mobilization against the new regime exposes women to a double sentence: because torture and imprisonments are also synonymous with sexual violence. More

generally, the case of both men and women victims of rape and different forms of torture in Iraqi prisons illustrates the failure of the new political regime to provide basic rights to its citizens. Stories of violence and repression at the hands of government forces affect the structure and challenges of Iraqi civil society mobilizations in postinvasion Iraq.

As mentioned in the Introduction of this chapter describing Medinat Al-Sadr, the generalized violence in which Iraq has been plunged since 2003 goes beyond sectarian violence opposing Sunni and Shi'a political militias. As shown by Harling (2012), the intra-Shi'a conflict has class dimensions opposing social outsiders represented by the Sadr current and other similar formations and coalitions of conservatives formed of Iraq's Shi'a middle class, the commercial elite living off the pilgrimage industry and tribes that historically enjoy close ties with the sanctuaries of Najaf, Karbala and al-Kazimiyya. In addition to this political-classist violence, there is also a very peculiar form of criminality of armed groups profiting from the very weakness of the state and the situation of lawlessness associated with it, especially in the first years after the invasion with assassinations and kidnapping for ransom. The Sunni and Shi'a armed groups targeted representatives of Iraq's modern and cosmopolitan middle class, such as doctors, professors, engineers, and lawyers living in the mixed areas of Baghdad and representing what was left of a mixed, progressive, and technically skilled population that was both the product and the basis of the modern state. For example, the Iraqi Lawyers Association declared in 2007 that since 2003, the number of lawyers decreased by 40 percent because 210 lawyers and judges had been killed since the fall (Sassoon 2012b).

The new state's weakness – its inability to provide security and respond to basic needs (such as access to running water, electricity, housing, and employment) – mismanagement, and corruption pushed Iraqis to rely on alternative sources of protection and service (Dodge 2005). In addition, according to many activists I interviewed, in line with reports of human rights abuses in Iraq conducted by Amnesty International in 2011 and 2013 regarding the abuse and neglect of detainees, the lack of respect for basic human rights by the army and security forces is common. The violent repression of the al-Anbar Sunni movement and more generally of all movements of protest against the new regime is also common (International Crisis Group 2013; Dodge 2013). Interestingly, Ala Ali's recent work (2014) on women's involvement in the al-Anbar conflict shows that women of al-Anbar expressed their attachment to the "state," positioning themselves outside sectarian belonging. For example, these women asked for the state to intervene against al-Qaeda groups rather than relying on local tribal leadership. In Sunni-dominated

provinces, as Ali observes, women remain attached to the "unified state" as the protector of their lives and interests.

In a context characterized by violence and a weak state, where individuals are pushed to rely on alternative sources of protection and security, tribal leadership gained significance. It is not surprising, therefore, that a large number of tribesmen and political leaders chose to join IS in June 2014, during its capture of Mosul. After this shocking event, Grand Ayatollah Sistani – the most important *marje'* in Iraq – called for a "*jihad* to preserve Iraq," which incited thousands of civilians to join the military operations against IS. The fragmentation of Iraq along communal lines – Kurds in the north, Sunnis in the West, and Shi'as in the south – appears irreversible.

Insiders, Outsiders: A Contested New Political Elite

As the country was under occupation and directly run by the American administration through the CPA, it was clearly impossible for anyone trying to organize a group or activity inside the country to avoid dealing with the occupation administration or the new political elite. It was inevitable for Iraqis inside the country, as well as for political exiles trying to return to Iraq. Some exiled women's rights activists decided not to return because of their opposition to the occupation and refusal to deal with such conditions. Some activists did return for two or three years, wanting to contribute to the "new Iraq" but left the country again out of anger about the occupation, disappointment in the new political elite, or fear for their lives as insecurity grew and living conditions became too hard to bear – e.g., electricity cuts, lack of running water, difficulty in moving around due to checkpoints, and so on. Most political exiles who returned to the country after the fall of the Ba'th regime had obtained citizenship in their host countries, whereas Iraqi women activists "from the inside" do not enjoy such a privilege. Many political activists left the country after the explosion of violence in 2006–7, when more than 1,000 Iraqis were killed every week in explosions, assassinations, or kidnappings; some of them did settle in Iraq, especially in the Green Zone, but had their children and families stay abroad. Again, non exiled Iraqi activists could not leave the country when the situation became unbearable, even when they received death threats from militias. Moreover, most of the new political leadership that came to power after 2003 settled in the Green Zone of Baghdad with the foreign embassies and the US-led administration. The rest of the population of Baghdad, including most women's rights activists, live amid thousands of checkpoints, concrete T-walls, and barriers that divide the city according to sectarian lines.

Sarah H., an activist of al-Rafidain Women's Coalition, believes that most Iraqis were afraid of political activism itself at the time; therefore, it was only natural that political activists from abroad were the first to participate in the political process after the fall. Nevertheless, she deplores the fact that the state formation process was undertaken by an elite that had been in exile for a long time and that "Iraqis from the inside" were not represented by the new political elite. Sarah also criticizes the new elite for its sectarianism and considers its politics to be a failure.

The change was difficult to take for us Iraqis. At the beginning, we did not even realize that the regime had fallen. We were afraid to get involved, because our memory of political activism was executions and repression, and not only of activists, but also of all their families. We were still afraid of Saddam. I tell you honestly, I was among these people who could hardly believe that Saddam's time was over. We did not even believe at first that he was dead. We thought he was about to come back. Thus, even among those who had political, nationalist awareness, people were scared to get involved in politics after the fall. The people who came back from exile, they came specifically for that. They came back from exile in order to get involved and, for some of them, to serve their own interest. The Governing Council was set up very far away from the people. It was so far away from us [that] there was only the political opposition from abroad who sat around the table, with the exception of very few political figures from the inside. There was Aqila al-Hashemi who was from the inside. She got killed shortly after she was appointed to the Governing Council because she was considered to be a figure of the previous regime, this is why. Other members of the Governing Council came from Kurdistan, people who were disconnected from Iraq for decades. It is true that they came with ideas and a will to implement the transition to a new regime, from a society ruled by one party to another, more pluralistic one. But they did it by adopting the wrong behavior, a sectarian way of being. They did not succeed at all. They failed.

Clearly, an activist's view of the political elite brought to power by the coalition forces relied heavily on the nature of the activist's relations with the opposition in exile. The more they were connected, through family or personal relations, to the new elite, the lower the level of their criticism. Nevertheless, after several years in power and the formation of several governments, the new elite received harsh criticism even from those who first welcomed their arrival. Corruption and mismanagement, as well as a sectarian managing of power, were (and are still) the main criticisms of the post-2003 political leadership. Shayma N., age forty-three, is a feminist activist member of the IWN and academic at Baghdad University. She worked at the Iraqiyat Studies Center on research on women and gender from a feminist perspective. As mentioned earlier, Shayma is from a family close to the Da'wa Party. Two of her brothers were sentenced to life in prison for their Da'wa Party membership and

were detained in Abu Ghraib prison; one was executed by the regime. Like many Iraqis who suffered under the Ba'th regime, especially those who belonged to opposition organizations, Shayma welcomed the fall of the regime, and despite her concerns, she was not opposed to the US-led intervention. According to her, Iraqis had no other choice because their uprisings had been repressed and silenced. Regarding the new political elite, including individuals close to her family, she explains:

If we think that people who struggled will come back occupying the position of simple advisor, we are living in Plato's Republic. I cannot understand the harshness toward people who have suffered so much. The first generation suffered enormously from the regime; maybe the second generation is now more at ease. When I used to hear about them and told about their activism, I was really proud. I wished some of them could be in power, but they did not have the opportunity to reach power or, when they came, their discourse changed into a sectarian and self-interested stand. I understand that some elements are stronger than them, [and] regional and international agendas were imposed onto them. Since the London Congress,[3] the Unites States faced divisions inside the opposition . . . I did not have any opposition to their arrival to power; on the contrary, I am the daughter of a Da'wa family. These people from the political opposition undertook a dignified struggle and suffered a lot. They experienced the destruction of their families and exile; they have martyrs . . . maybe my judgment toward them is influenced by the fact that I was among the people who did suffer under the regime. But you can notice that I am paying the price for a thought that I do not belong to. This is why I am paying for my identity while I disagree with them and write articles criticizing them.

Shayma has lived in Baghdad under very difficult conditions for almost her entire life. However, despite the religious and political orientation of her family, she chose to get involved in a secular mode. Shayma does not agree with political Islam, but she also does not condemn it; she does not consider religious parties' rise to power as illegitimate in itself but has criticized the new elite for its mismanagement and corruption.

Corruption was widespread under Saddam, and it was very difficult to get rid of this phenomenon. Those who came to power acted as if corruption was legitimate. These incredibly exorbitant salaries for their work convinced the population that corruption is normal. These religious parties are guilty of a great fault. It is not illegitimate that religious parties access power, as well as all the groups that struggled . . . But, if you see the Parliament today, if you look at their diplomas and their level of culture and education, they are not representative of Iraqis . . . Administrative corruption became legitimate when people saw incompetent individuals coming to power, people who are only following the lines of their parties and not doing anything else. People wait for their wishes to be realized, martyrs

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[3] One of several congresses organized by the US administration and Iraqi political opposition to prepare the invasion prior 2003.

families wait for compensations … competent individuals are waiting for their turn to participate. What happened is the destruction of a dream that Iraqis believed in.

Like many women's rights activists, Shayma participates in demonstrations and gatherings denouncing corruption, mismanagement, and sectarianism and demanding democratic and transparent elections. Again, these civil society dynamics were not easy to set up because widespread insecurity did not facilitate the organization of any political action. Some activists also considered that power should have been shared between "insider" and "outsider" political opposition and pointed out that people who left Iraq for decades were disconnected from the on-the-ground realities and thus incapable of running the country.

Maha S., like many activists who never left Iraq, thinks the issue should not be about insiders or outsiders but about who cares for Iraq and will serve the country's interest rather than their own personal, political, or sectarian interests.

It became normal for these people, just because they were involved in the political opposition, to think that they deserve access to the government, even when they don't have the competence, experience, or capacity. To be from the inside or the outside is not an issue for me. When somebody has struggled so much, why doesn't he want to share with the people of Iraq what he learned abroad? Democracy, cleanliness of public spaces, public health – why not implement them here? Why don't they want the best for our children? Export what is good abroad, for example, the peaceful power transition. We are paying the price of that. I know very well that the government members, who receive exorbitant salaries, all have a second passport, a second residence abroad, and children who do not live inside Iraq. If tomorrow the situation becomes too dangerous for them, they will leave Iraq and go back to their homes abroad. They would all run away from the country. Every day I am scared; I feel the absence of security. They do not put a foot on Iraqi streets; they move around with tinted windows, escorted by dozen of cars protecting them in the front and back.

Maha points out the privileges enjoyed by the new political elite, which represent a fundamental difference between Iraqis from the inside and those from the diaspora. She criticizes the lack of interest in and knowledge about the concrete needs and realities of Iraqis. Many activists express the distance they feel between themselves – who have lived in Iraq all their lives and experienced wars, uprisings, and the sanctions period – and activists who have built their lives abroad under very different conditions. Certainly, the image of the political elite and its fancy life abroad is a fantasy of many "insider" Iraqis; many exiles and their families had far from comfortable lives in the countries in which they settled. Some women activists had lived in very difficult conditions, settling in

three or four different countries and never holding a European or American passport. Some former exiles benefited from grassroots support, whether as prominent religious leaders or as "simple" activists involved right after 2003 who managed to build themselves a reputation of integrity and transparency.

Between Gender and Sectarian Quotas: The Politics of Representation and the Women of the New Regime

In Iraq as in Afghanistan, international political actors and the new political leaders insisted on women's visibility in the political sphere (Kandiyoti 2007; Khattak 2002). Under the pressure of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), UN-Women, and the American occupation administration, an enormous focus was placed on "women's visibility" and "political participation." As a result of this international pressure and in addition to the mobilization of women's rights activists, Iraqi politicians were urged to appoint women at decisional positions. On the ground, what I heard and observed was that women were often chosen by male political leaders to fill the quotas for each party, the government, or the Parliament. In the first years after the invasion, women's nominations for government, Parliament, provincial, and municipal councils were mainly based on family and personal relationships.

The first period (2003–5) was characterized by the presence of women who were themselves either former exiles or personally related to the families of exiled anti-Ba'th leaders. However, because the communal quota system established by the occupying powers allocates a certain number of positions and seats to each community (Shi'a, Sunni, Kurd, etc.), women of the new regime represented both their gender and their communal groups. In line with the overarching politics of the invasion's first years, competence was less important than representativeness in choosing the new political leadership.

Aziza is a forty-five-year-old former dentist from an educated middle-class Baghdadi family. Aziza's young cousin was close to the anti-Ba'th Shi'a movement and was executed by the regime in 1978. Before the fall of the regime, Aziza attended underground religious gatherings and was close to important Shi'a Islamist figures of the opposition. After the fall, she immediately joined the meetings organized by the newly returned Shi'a political leaders. Aziza organized many meetings and activities for women – primarily lectures on issues related the women's everyday lives but in the framework of Shi'a political Islam – that she called the "School of Shahid al-Sadr." As a member of the Iraqi National Association, a Shi'a political group, Aziza was appointed to the first Iraqi Governing

Council and the first Iraqi Parliament. I meet her at her home in Baghdad's Green Zone. At our meeting, Aziza tells me me that her appointment to the Iraqi Governing Council stemmed from the assassination a Shi'a women political leader.

After she was killed – may Allah have mercy on her soul – they needed a personality, a woman, Shi'a, educated, who spoke English. As most of my studies were in English, I was eligible to join the Council. The Americans asked me to pass an English test, and after I got 7/10 on the test, they chose me out of twenty women to become a member of the Council.

Aziza also says that the US administration was at first reluctant that she joined the Governing Council because of her *'abaya*. According to Aziza, many US policymakers disregarded women political leaders who wore the headscarf or *'abaya*.

The big issue I have encountered with the Americans is that they take issue with my *'abaya*. I was coming to the Council in my *'abaya*; I signed the Administration Treaty of Power in Iraq in *'abaya*. For them [the Americans], the *'abaya* refers to Iran. I have never seen Iran before; I have no link at all with Iran. The first time I went to Iran was in 2005. They [the Americans] were telling me that I was wearing the Iranian *chador*. I tried to explain that it is not the case. There were also these Western women that came with the Americans and were advisors in the ministries; they also disregarded us, we veiled Iraqi women, and considered us backward. I tried to explain to them that we were not that.

Aziza's narrative is interesting on many levels because it reveals the concrete interactions and the nature of the relations between Iraqis and the occupying administration. The insistence on English proficiency as a requirement for admission to the Governing Council shows that Iraqis were supposed to make the effort to communicate with the occupying forces. Iraqis had to be English speakers; the Americans did not have to learn a word of Arabic, even though they were establishing, and putting into power, the new political elite of Iraq. The reaction to the *'abaya* – and confusion with the Iranian *chador* – reflects the US administration's total ignorance of Iraqi culture, as well as its desire to form a leadership based on its political interests and criteria of Iraqiness. The CPA needed a Shi'a Arab woman to achieve its sectarian representation of Iraqi identity, as well as fulfill its women's quota. This desired "Iraqiness" had to adhere to the CPA's criteria: not pro-Iranian and not too "backward." Their ignorance of and contempt for such a typical Iraqi garment reveals a lot about the occupying power's approach to Iraq and Iraqis. It is also interesting to note that Aziza does not always wear the *'abaya; hijab* is her everyday garment because she considers the *'abaya* to be impractical when lecturing at Baghdad University or seeing patients

at the medical clinic. Aziza explains that she wears the *'abaya* only on "special occasions," such as religious and political events and gatherings. In Aziza's opinion, representing Iraq is a religious duty. Hence she wore the *'abaya* at the Iraqi Governing Council because it is an important symbol of Iraqi culture and a reminder – like a uniform or a religious garment – to perform her role as both a political and religious leader. The English language and garment criteria are two examples among many that show the nature of the interaction between the occupying administration and Iraqis – a clear cultural and political domination typical of colonial power relations.

Aziza became a very well-known political activist in Iraq, and as mentioned previously, she lost her son and sister in the sectarian violence. The sectarian feature of post-2003 Iraqi politics created lot of victims among the ranks of women political activists. However, not only was the violent aftermath of sectarian politics a real problem for women's activism, but it also had a direct impact on the work of Iraqi representatives in state institutions. Many government, Parliament, Baghdad municipality, and provincial council representatives told me that the distribution of committees and sectors according to sectarian belonging constituted a real problem for their work. The ministerial, parliamentary, and provincial committees are distributed in advance according to ethno/religious/political group of belonging. Thus a political leader does not choose his or her sphere of work according to competence and merit; the sphere of work is chosen according to his or her political affiliation, which corresponds to his or her ethno/religious/political belonging. Thus many representatives were appointed to positions that have nothing to do with their spheres of knowledge or competence. This situation led to dysfuntion and inefficiency within state institutions and contributed to the political and administrative chaos that dominates the Iraqi political scene.

Betul M. – a prominent Shiʿa Islamist representative – believes that the ethnosectarian quota system is the root of state and government dysfunction. She represents Tayar al-Islah, a Shiʿa political group founded by Ibrahim al-Jaʿfari, at the Baghdad Provincial Council and faces much difficulty.

We face a lot of problems at the Baghdad Provincial Council. The greater problem, in reality, is the communal quota system. Democracy is still immature in Iraq, still at its beginnings. It is like a newborn that is disabled; it needs a lot of time and care to make it walk properly. Because of the communal quota system, the allocation of seats and committees in the council are not related to the representatives' skills or competence. I had to struggle to get on the Committee of Civil Society Organizations, because I felt that as a civil society and women's activist, it

was my place to be on this committee. But once I joined this committee, I faced a lot of conflicts with the head of the committee. This man, once he became the head of a committee, thought he became the King of Baghdad. We are both elected representatives; he has his position, and I have mine. I proposed him to divide Baghdad into different zones in order to operate more efficiently. He imposed the areas where he wanted to work, and he refused to work in certain areas. Let's be honest here, the problem is sectarianism. He told me: "You take al-Sadr, al-Kazimiyya, al-Istiqlal, al-Kerrada etc. [all Shi'a areas], and I take Abu Ghraib, Tarmiyya, Mayadin and al-A'zamiyya etc.[all Sunni areas]." I finally told him that I agreed, because I cannot go to these places with my ID card and my *'abaya*. The *'abaya* is the most visible sign, as you know. And at the time, after 2005, it was dangerous. But even today, I do not know these areas or trust going there. Anyway, I cannot access these areas ... Before the fall, didn't we live all together, Sunnis and Shi'as, all neighbors? I am a Shi'a from Medinat al-Sadr, and the wife of my maternal uncle is Sunni. Before, it was normal. When the militias began to expel Sunnis from Medinat al-Sadr, my family and I we did not give any names, not one Sunni name. We also gave a *ta'ahed* ["protection contract"] to our Sunnis neighbors, in order to take these Sunni families under our protection. But this was not the case for everyone. Some people were under pressure; they felt pressure from foreign agendas, but I do not consider these people Iraqis, or even Muslims. Islam is innocent of all that. Islam made us "peoples and tribes" [quote from the Qur'an]; it teaches us respect and tolerance.

The government, cautious to show its efforts at encouraging women's participation and improving their conditions, created a Ministry of Women's Affairs in June 2004. Nermin Othman, from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, was appointed as a state's office minister. This ministry was framed and sponsored by UN-Women (previously UNIFEM) and other international organizations, which financed most of its activities, just as they would any other organization or civil society association. The ministry itself does not have any allocated budget and is still, according to two ministers with whom I spoke, an office inside the general secretary of the prime minister's building. The ministry has only a dozen managerial staff.

The second period (2005–10) was marked by the drafting of and referendum for the new Iraqi Constitution, as well as the legislative election that followed. Although there were very few women involved in the process of drafting the Constitution, the new Iraqi Electoral Law instituted a quota of 25 percent for women (30 percent in the Kurdish governorate) in representative assemblies.[4] While controversy surrounded Article 41, there was a general consensus on the adoption of

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[4] According to Article 49.4 of the Constitution and according to Election Law no. 16 of 2005 as amended by no. 17, candidate's certification, 2009, paragraph 1/C, the proportion of women in the candidate lists cannot be less than 25 percent.

a women's quota; many activists see this adoption to be the result of their mobilizations, despite the fact that most women's organizations advocated for at least 40 percent. However, for many activists and analysts (Al-Nadawi 2010; Jameel Rashid 2006, 2010; Mekki Hamadi 2010), the quota brought to power "women of parties" rather than women's rights activists. In addition, the participation and "performance" of such "women of parties" in the assemblies has been very weak and mostly limited to "women's issues" (Al-Nadawi, 2010; Mekki Hamadi, 2010). Many parliamentarians and members of provincial councils, as well as candidates and members of electoral lists that I interviewed, noted that male political leaders "chose" women in order to fulfill their party quotas but had no real intention of opening space for women's concrete participation, especially when it came to important decisions. According to some activists, the idea that women were "politically incompetent" was reinforced by this quota system because women's presence in assemblies was seen as solely due to the quota, not political competence and experience. However, most activists also acknowledged that without the quota system, very few women would have been elected to the Parliament or provincial councils (Jameel Rashid 2006, 2010).

For example, the scholar-activist Ilham Mekki Hamadi pointed out in her qualitative study, "The Political Culture of Iraqi Women Parliamentarians" (2010), that 64.3 percent of the parliamentarians she interviewed refuted the idea that women's entry into Parliament has had any "impact on their traditional roles, which consist of being mothers and looking after their family." Khadija A. is a forty-year-old mathematician who directs a department in the Ministry of Sciences and Technology. In 2012, Khadija ran for Parliament on the Iraqi List of the Ayad 'Alawi, a non-Islamist and nonsectarian political group, and did not win. She spoke of her experience with this political group.

I wish we didn't need the quota to take our place, that men were not privileged, but the mentalities consider women to be incompetent. You cannot find a woman in a decision-making position. I am a leader in the Iraqi List, but I didn't attend any meetings where important decisions were discussed. I am invited only to the meetings where we are informed of the decisions that have already been made. It is the same for all the women of the List. The political leaders that we had, they obtained their position through the quota, not because of their competence. Look at our ministry, among our twelve offices, we don't have a single woman director of office, although we have many competent women. Also, if we look at our parliamentarians, they come only to occupy the number of seats required and the thirty body guards that are provisioned. The last parliament [2005–10] didn't serve women, including in the writing of the constitution.

Furthermore, Nahla al-Nadawi pointed out in her study, "Iraqi Women's Parliamentary Performance" (2010), that the interest in women's visibility did not translate into political concern for women's issues; among the 400 laws voted on between 2005 and 2010 in the Iraqi Parliament, only one directly concerned women's issues. Moreover, the focus on women's visibility has decreased as Iraq has become a less central issue for international policymakers. During the formation of the Iraqi Interim Government between June 2004 and May 2005, five women[5] were appointed as ministers; after the January 2005 legislative elections, there were only six women[6] among thirty-two ministers; and after the December 2005 legislative elections, there were only four women[7] ministers.

Since 2010, only two women ministers retained positions: Ibtihal al-Zaidy, the Minister of State in Charge of Women's Affairs, who is a forty-eight-year-old Ph.D. (Arabic Literature) and member of the Da'wa Party, and Bushra al-Zuwaidy, from the Shi'a Islamist Party al-Fazila, who is in charge of the office dealing with victims of terrorism in the Ministry of Social Affairs. The reduced number of women ministers indicates a lessening concern for women's participation in the political sphere and reveals how this "concern" was always more of a showcase than a real interest. In addition, conservative Shi'a Islamists won the majority of seats in the new Iraqi Parliament, and many activists believe that the power held by such Islamists does not serve women's rights activism. Islamist women, even if individually supportive of women's rights, have to toe their political group's line even if such implies voting for conservative measures regarding women.

After the parliamentary election of 2014, it has been difficult to follow the appointment of Iraqi representatives because the country has faced a deep political crisis caused by the invasion of IS of parts of western and northern Iraq in June 2014. With great difficulty, but thanks to the popular and Sadrist pressure, Haider al-'Abadi replaced Nuri al-

[5] These five ministers were Mishkat al-Moumin, Minister of the Environment; Nesreen Berwari, Minister of Public Works; Pascal Esho Warda, Minister of Immigration and Refugees; Nermin Othman, Minister of State in Charge of Women's Affairs; Leila Abdul-Latfi, Minister of Work and Social Affairs.

[6] These six ministers were Nesreen Perwari, Minister of Public Works; Nermin Othman, Minister of the Environment; Bassima Yusuf Butrus, Minister of Sciences and Technologies; Jwan Maasum, Minister of Communications; Suhayla Abdel Jaafar, Minister of Displacements and Migrations; Azhar Abdel Karim al-Shaikhly, Minister of State in charge of Women's Affairs.

[7] These four ministers were Nermin Othman, Minister of the Environment; Wijdan Mikhael, Minister of Human Rights; Bayan Diza'i, Minister of Housing and Construction; Fatin Rahman Mahmoud Shaikhli, Minister of State in Charge of Women's Affairs.

Maliki, and the government was partly reappointed through the principle of hiring "technocrats" instead of politicians. A Kurdish Islamist, Bayan Nuri, was appointed as the new Minister of Women's Affairs, and he pointed out the same issues already mentioned by former ministers: the absence of proper funding and governmental support.

Politicized Islam and Sectarianism at the Core of Women's Representatives Divide

Several measures and declarations of the Islamist Minister of State in Charge of Women's Affairs, Ibtihal al-Zaidy, provoked controversy in the Iraqi media and among women rights activists, who painted the new minister as a fundamentalist opposed to women's rights. I interviewed al-Zaidy in her office at the General Secretariat of the Prime Minister in May 2012 and discussed the controversies surrounding her. At the time, she opposed the opening of women's shelters and recommended that "women employees wear appropriate attire" in governmental offices. She explained that, on a personal level, she was not against opening shelters for women victims of abuse, such as the ones in Kurdistan. Al-Zaidy spoke about the huge number of cases she received every day and related the story of one particular woman. This woman was about to be released from prison, and al-Zaidy was helping her start her life again by finding a house and job for her. According to al-Zaidy, there was no social and political will for such projects in Iraq today; the reality of running the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which itself relies on other ministries to set up any project, made all her initiatives dependent on the will of male political leaders.

We have to convince political leaders. The opening of shelters for women must not be carried out by organizations, but put under the responsibility of the Ministry of Work so that it is under the ministry's protection. I want it to be a "State house." Just like "the house of orphans" and the "house of elderly people," it would be a "house for women without shelter" protected by the Interior Ministry. For that, I have to convince the Ministry of Work and the society. In Kurdistan, they have worked on this since the 1990s, and they have only just managed to open it. We need time for that, even if I acknowledge that it is a real necessity. You know it existed in the Abbasid period; they called it the "house of angry women." We will try not to name it like that, because this will scare men. We will call it a "house for women without a shelter" because we have women that live on the streets and don't have anywhere to go, even very young girls. We want a "house of the state" that would give them training, support them in their studies, and help them find a job and get married. If I had a budget, I could do all that, but I am actually dependent on the other ministries, and I have to convince them.

The minister also pointed out the reality, highlighted by many activists as well, at the core of her ministry's inability to truly function: the ministry was created to be merely an "advisory office" of the prime minister's office. Most women activists consider this ministry to be just a facade for the new regime to show its concern for women; there was never any intention of allocating a proper budget or giving it the same status as other ministries. The lack of funds and state support caused Nawal al-Samara'i, the former minister, to resign after six months in protest.

I entered al-Zaidy's office after several old women left; the women were visibly from a very poor background and had come to ask the minister for help. Very often, between electricity cuts, the minister receives groups of women in need. With the help of her team, the minister tries to help such women by offering financial support or helping them find housing and a job. The ministry does not have offices in the provinces, its work is concentrated in Baghdad, and only occasional trips are made to the provinces. On its website, the ministry asks women running small professional and social projects to submit a form in order to see whether the ministry can find a way to support the project. Indeed, the Ministry of Women's Affairs works as any other civil society organization; the only difference is that the ministry is headed by a woman with ministerial status and a security escort. Of course, this reality did not prevent Ibtihal az-Zaidy from morally supporting the project of women's shelters. Her insistence on the limitations of Iraqi society and political leaders sought to excuse the fact that she did not want to cross the line of conservative gender politics and be associated with liberal women's rights activism. In a very normative climate regarding women's clothes, her insistence on "appropriate women's attire" revealed her desire to perform alignment with Islamist politics.

In a context where all the Ministry of Women's Affairs' measures follow the agenda of UN-Women, requiring "appropriate attire" is a very symbolic affirmation of an Islamist agenda. According to the minister herself, all her projects and strategies – e.g. "opposing violence against women", "women's promotion" and the "gender mainstreaming campaign" – are "elaborated, written and evaluated" by UN-women; "translation into Arabic" is the ministry's role. However, Ibtihal al-Zaidy was also in agreement with most Iraqi women activists in terms of the need to preserve the PSC. In addition, she supports the reform of the discriminatory articles in the PSC and Punishment Law according to "a modern perspective that breaks the old ideas and traditions, and follows the example of other modern countries." She also expressed a desire to establish gender training programs in all state institutions and require male political leaders to attend such

trainings. When I asked if the ministry was planning to follow the KRG example – i.e., partnering with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Union of the 'Ulema to give campaigns religious legitimacy – al-Zaidy said she never considered such an approach. Therefore, despite symbolic measures typical of Islamist politics, such as "appropriate women's attire," the ministry's politics are secular; al-Zaidy never considered including religious institutions or scholars in the ministry's initiatives.

Azhar al-Shaikhly – a fifty-five-year-old human and women's rights activist and professor of constitutional law – was the Minister in Charge of Women Affairs between May 2005 and May 2006. We discussed her experience at her parliamentary office in al-Kerrada in May 2012. She explained that unlike many women activists, she did not consider the new minister's Islamist background, in and of itself, to be a barrier to defending women's rights because *shari'a* is and has always been a main source of legislation. According to al-Shaikhly, Ibtihal az-Zaidy's lack of experience in women's rights and disconnection from women's rights activism in Iraq is the problematic point. Al-Shaikhly believed that it would be far more useful to close this "fake ministry" and create an entity that follows the KRG model of the High Council of Women's Affairs. She also said that the PSC should be preserved and discriminatory legislations should be reformed.

I am not for a specific group; I am for the respect of the law. The *shari'a* is part of the law and I am against opposition to the law. Now, there are some articles and measures related to past conditions that are now obsoletes and have to be reformed. I am for individual freedom within the limits of what is possible in our oriental culture. I also defend the Personal Status Code that is until now, apart from Tunisia and Morocco, the best guarantor of women's rights in the Arab world.

Despite their ideological differences, these two ministers are in agreement with regard to the PSC. Al-Shaikhly is from a liberal, educated Sunni family and lived all her life in Baghdad's mixed al-Kerrada neighborhood. Al-Zaidy is from an educated Shi'a family and grew up in Mosul; her father was a university professor, and most of her friends and neighbors in Mosul were Christians and Sunnis. Both al-Shaikhly and al-Zaidy emphasized the importance of respecting Iraq's "Muslim culture," considering their culture to be "specific" and "different from the West," especially with regard to women's morality and respectability. They both come from a generation that despite awareness of discrimination related to communal belonging was not structured around sectarianism and believed in a unified Iraqi "nationhood." Their divergences relate

to politically oriented issues associated with the sectarian politics of post-2003 Iraq.

As Haifa Zangana points out, Baghdad turned into a "city of widows" (2007) in a country in political and economic chaos, where official estimates count 1.5 million female-headed households (mostly widows and divorced women).[8] Female representatives receive an enormous number of grievances and demands. However, despite the conservative environment that dominates Iraqi politics, the lessening interest in women's visibility and international actors' support for women's presence in the political sphere, many activists feel that the women elected in 2010 were more representative of women's concerns and less linked to the opposition's political leaders. According to many, the emergence of independent women political leaders helped to compete with party-backed women who privileged their parties' line over women's rights concerns. Several attempts were made, especially through the initiative of independent women parliamentarians, to set up a women's parliamentary caucus to unite women of different political orientations around essential women's rights claims. The latest initiative – the Parliamentary Coalition in Support of Women – was launched in March 2012; it is primarily composed of independent parliamentarians who wish to transcend the divisions in Iraqi politics – especially the Islamist/secular, sectarian and ethnic divides – around women's rights issues.

Conclusion: Women Representatives Acting between a Weak State and a Fragmented Nationhood

As pointed out by J. Ismael and T. Ismael (2015), the United States failed to achieve many of its aims in Iraq. If it removed the regime of Saddam Hussein and improved the position of Western oil companies in the Iraqi oil market, the political elite that it put in power in Iraq is not the pro-American regime it had envisioned but a regime that is inclined toward Iran. The engineering of a fragmented ethnosectarian Iraqi state, while beneficial in the short term to the United States in the realm of oil, has important consequences in terms of regional politics and the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East and beyond. History seems to replay itself: like the British occupation of

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[8] Although there are no precise data due to a lack of statistic research on the Iraqi population because of political reasons, this was an estimation given to me in May 2012 by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Committee for Women, Children and Family, and the Ministry of Planning.

Iraq in 1917, the United States aligned itself with conservative forces.

Postinvasion Iraq has been marked by the rise of sectarian violence, political chaos, and the rise of conservative Islamist forces. The CPA's institutionalization of a communal ethnosectarian political system, the coming to power of the Ba'th opposition's political elite dominated by Kurdish nationalists and conservative Shi'a Islamists with their *mazlumiyya* ideology, and the different policies undertaken by the CPA and the new regime have exacerbated social and political tensions and plunged Iraq into unspeakable violence. The new state imposes a fragmented nationhood and grants different levels of citizenship according to its own sectarian and *mazlumiyya* version of Iraq's history. The very destruction of the state as a unifying entity, a social and economic provider, deeply impacted Iraqis social and economic life. The new regime's endemic corruption and use of violence as a tool of repression of the opposition exacerbate sectarian and political violence. As a result, women activists are working in a context where the state is weak and unreliable: it is incapable of providing basic rights for its citizens – such as security and access to basic services (water, electricity, healthcare) – and implementing a *state of law*. The overall climate of insecurity and political crisis, along with the competing powers of militias on the streets and conservative parties in power, have a great impact on women's everyday lives and shape the limits and possibilities for women's rights advocacy.

The new Iraqi regime emphasizes women's political participation in the framework of the communal system; as such, women involved in state institutions act as communal "representatives" rather than as independent activists. The women's quota and emphasis on political participation seem to stand at odds with women's current social, economic, and political realities. These policies did, however, bring women into the governmental sphere: they allowed women representatives – mainly from Shi'a Islamist and Kurdish nationalist parties – to enter government, Parliament, and provincial councils. Thus it can be argued that the gender politics of postinvasion Iraq are marked by "representativeness" rather than addressing economic and social inequalities. This brief description of the context that shapes Iraqi women's realities shows how they are caught between, in Deniz Kandiyoti's words, "the hammer and the anvil": "they have to fight both for their formal *de jure* rights that are under constant threat from conservative social forces and for their substantive rights to security and human dignity that have become the casualties of endemic lawlessness and impunity in their societies" (2007a).